"Across Country"

BY

"WANDERER"

ILLUSTRATED BY G. BOWERS

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ACROSS COUNTRY.

"I will give you the market odds."

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BY "WANDERER."

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY G. BOWERS.

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"ACROSS COUNTRY."

GEORGE LATCHFORD.

"WHO is that pretty girl in the blue habit?" asked George Latchford of his friend Warden, as they were waiting for the West Blankshire hounds to move on towards the first covert.

"Do you mean the fair one on one of old Lettem's screws?" answered Warden. "I don't know her name, but it's someone that's stopping with friends at Farnmouth."

"She's awfully pretty, anyhow," remarked George. "I should like to be introduced to her. Can't you do it?"

"No, indeed I can't, old man, or else I would," replied his friend; "but here's Cap Thornton—he will, I'm sure. Cap, there's a friend of mine here that wants to be presented to that pretty girl on Lettem's bay. Will you do the job for him? But perhaps you want to go in for spooning her yourself?"

"I?" answered Mr. Thornton, blushing up to the roots of his hair. "Why, I'm an engaged man."

"Dear me, so you are; I quite forgot. Well, then, just introduce my friend Mr. Latchford, will you?"

"Come on, then, Mr. Latchford," replied the good-natured man, touching up his sturdy cob. "I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before, but it don't matter. Miss Clarke is staying with some friends of mine, and I am supposed to look after her to-day. But no doubt she'll get on better with you than with a man like myself, almost as good as married."

And the next moment the ceremony of introduction was performed, much to the satisfaction of Latchford, and apparently not to the displeasure of the object of his admiration.

George Latchford was certainly just the sort of a man to produce a pleasant impression upon a girl not *blasée* with London seasons, and he probably seldom showed to more advantage than in the hunting-field, particularly with a distinctly provincial pack like the Blankshire hounds. They were a long way from London, and at least equally far from the grass countries. They hunted a part of the world which consisted of wide tracts of moor not entirely free from bogs, alternating with deep and fertile valleys in which the small fields were separated from each other by hedges growing on the wide tops of stone walls. Such a country was not adapted to show off bold riding or brilliant jumping powers. On the moor there was scarcely any fencing at all, and in the valleys no horse could possibly jump the formidable obstacles. Yet the Blankshire foxes, which were frequently found in patches of gorse on the edges of the moor, and whose head-quarters were the thick woods near the heads of the valleys, were strong, wary, and wild. Very long runs were not unfrequent; bursts across the moor, during which the hounds ran at least as fast as the Quorn or the Pytchley, occurred whenever the scent was at all good and the fox not a craven. Therefore, though fashion might be wanting, there was plenty of sport with the Blankshire hounds, and the followers of the hunt justly held their heads high. In the matter of dress, however, and in the delicate *nuances* which have been introduced by the hyper-civilized sportsmen of the Metropolitan shires, our Blankshire friends were a few years behind. When, therefore, George Latchford appeared at the meet carefully enveloped in an ulster

and an apron, and then burst on the spectators with tops of the palest cream (just then the last fashionable hue), boots of graceful shape, thin texture, and lustrous polish, a pink coat fresh and new, with velvet collar and cuffs, waistcoat with sunflowers and other æsthetic designs, a stephanotis in his button-hole, with a small bottle ingeniously hung behind to preserve its freshness, gloves with two buttons, unsullied by wind, rain, or wear, he created some little sensation, not untempered by contempt among the men and admiration among the ladies. If the man was too much of a dandy (as they called them then) to look quite like business, his horse was not open to the same reproach. "A rare good sort," was Cap Thornton's verdict as he looked him over while Latchford was endeavouring to make himself as agreeable as possible to Miss Clarke. "If that swell can go as well as his horse, he'll do. But I don't much believe in camellias and scent bottles and yellow tops myself," muttered he, as he looked down on his mahogany ones. "I shouldn't wonder, now, if that bee-autiful flower was to drop out at the first fence. I shall have to keep my eye on that girl, too, for I know old Lettem don't give much for his nags, and this one looks no better than he should be. It's a good thing she's a light weight, and she can ride a bit, too."

Half of this was soliloquy, half to his brother "Hat" Thornton, who was dressed in a similar workmanlike style, with a pink coat verging on a mulberry hue like Cap's, and mounted on a similar horse. The two brothers were the owners of Beauclere Park, a fine place a few miles off, where they had dwelt harmoniously as bachelors together since the old Squire's death ten years before. Now "Cap" was going to be married, but it had been agreed between them that Hat should remain at Beauclere, and the future bride had willingly consented to the arrangement. Hat's function was, they said, to be an uncle. Under his father's will he might have had the place sold and divided the proceeds with his brother, but he would not think of letting Beauclere go out of the family, and preferred living there as a bachelor than anywhere else with the most beautiful woman in England. At least

so he said, and he looked forward to his brother's wedding with as much pleasure as if it had been his own.

Meanwhile the hounds had moved on.

"Have you been long at Farnmouth, Miss Clarke?" asked Latchford of his fair companion.

"No," said she. "My mother has not been well lately, and the doctors recommended Farnmouth as a nice mild place for the winter. We only came last week, and Mr. Thornton and his brother are almost the only people I know. Are they not funny?"

"I never saw them until to-day," answered George. "I have heard a good deal about them since I have been down, but they have been away, busy with Mr. Cap's intended. By-the-bye, does he always wear a cap, even in church?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied she, laughing. "I have never seen him without it, at any rate, and that's why he is called Cap. Nobody seems to know what his real name is."

"Have you been out with these hounds before?" continued George.

"Yes, once, last Friday. I had the same horse; he is not nearly so bad as he looks. At first I thought he was a horrid brute, and almost felt inclined to send him back when he was brought to the door on Friday. I was quite ashamed of him! But he jumps very well, and gallops fast; only I have to be rather careful of his forelegs, and he pulls hard sometimes. I wish I had one of my own!" said Miss Clarke, as they stopped up at the covert-side.

"I have got one that would suit you exactly," remarked George, as the thought struck him that Miss Clarke might possibly be very well off, and that a hundred would come in very handy.

"I am afraid mamma would scarcely let me commit such an extravagance as to buy a hunter," said the girl. "Besides, men's horses seldom suit ladies."

"Oh!" replied he; "Zephyretta is quite a lady's palfrey. You shall see her on Saturday if you come to Bigglesden Cross Roads. She's a perfect angel, but not quite up to my weight."

"I do believe they are on a fox!" exclaimed Miss Clarke, watching the waving sterns as they appeared every now and then in the underwood, and listening eagerly for some more of that music of which the first notes had just fallen on her ear.

Then came that period of anxious suspense, of riding up the covert side and down again; of looking and hearkening, so well known to every fox-hunter. "There's no fox there," came from one man. "They're on him; have at him, ough, at him, Diana!" from another. "It's only a hare, and they're running riot as usual," from the professional grumbler of the hunt. "Get back, Myra, will ye; get back!" from a farmer, as one of the younger members of the pack is seen outside the thorn hedge, instead of boldly plunging into it. "Keep on this side, gentlemen, please," from Ned Bowers, the first whip, as he sees a few over-eager ones sneaking round the corner. "Give the fox a chance, if there is one in the place!" "There's no fox here," retorted the grumbler, who was one of the guilty ones. "Then if there ain't, what's the use of hurrying?" was the obvious repartee, which brought them all back to the rest of the field.

But suddenly there fell on the air a loud "Tally ho! gone awa-a-y! gone a-w-a-y!" and the huntsman's horn is heard too-tooing on the far side of the gorse, the echo being taken up by the hounds in a simultaneous burst of music.

"Don't wedge yourself into that gate, Miss Clarke," cried George Latchford, letting his horse go. "This way; there's an easy jump here."

And popping over a small fence, he led his fair companion into a field covered with that short, close grass which tells of moorland and gorse. Over this they galloped to a gate at the far corner, whence they could see the hounds streaming over the breezy moor, only a couple of hundred yards ahead. Through the gate, while Hat and Cap Thornton topped the hedge to lose no time, and the rest of the field, having squeezed through the little wicket at the covert-side, are hurrying to the open. There is a good scent on the heather, which is still thick with the faded flowers; the ground is firm, and though the galloping is

not quite smooth, most of the horses, being used to the country, go as fast over the heath as they would over turf. The fox is running up wind, but there is not much of it, and the breeze the riders feel is mostly due to their own rapid motion. Every now and then they come to patches of green grass, smooth and even enough for tennis, and there they let their horses go. Not many yards further, and a strip of bare sand intervenes, where the hounds run with less dash, and scent is uncertain. Then again on the heather it is breast high, and they run faster than ever. There are no casualties, except that little Master Green on his pony is gradually left behind, and Cross, the sporting chemist, comes down heavily, his horse having put his foot into a rabbit hole. "Let him plaister up his own bruises, he's got half his shop in his pocket," says Cap, cheerily, hustling his old horse along: "this is a rare good fox, we can't stop for the doctors." But Reynard is too knowing to cross the whole width of the moor up wind. He makes a sharp turn, and the hounds having been somewhat hurried by the eager riders, suddenly throw up. Little Master Green gets a chance, and even the chemist, coming in sight of the field whom he thought he had lost for good, regains fresh hope and strength. Guffing, the huntsman, suspecting the cause of the check, "tries back," and then makes a scientific cast. No need now to hold back the field, most of whom are glad of a few minutes' respite for their horses. Miss Clarke—we will give her her full name, Edith Clarke—looked prettier than ever. A number of stray locks were blowing about her face, which was animated with the excitement of the chase, and rosy with the glow of a rapid gallop. Her eyes were sparkling with pleasure, and her parted lips just showed a glimpse of two very pearly teeth. Her lithe but rounded figure swayed gently forwards as she let her horse nibble the scented grass, as horses always do, however much they are blown, and George Latchford said to himself that she was one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen. Now it must be confessed that George was a terrible flirt, but not quite an ordinary one. For he always fancied that he was deeply in love with the object of his

flirtation, and without the slightest intention to deceive, acted and spoke as if he could not live without her. Indeed, after an evening spent at a ball where his most recent flame was present, he would occasionally go home in a mood verging on despair, because she had only danced three times with him, while she had sat on the stairs for an hour with "that beast in the Hussars." He would lie awake half the night worrying himself with similar thoughts, and during the rest he would dream of her. He would even write poetry, rising from his warm bed on a cold winter's morning to indite the veriest rubbish ever composed. Yet in a short time, a week, a month, or three months, as the case might be, he would meet some other lady who would suddenly oust the former from his heart and occupy her place. And his feelings for her would be as warm and as genuine as had been those for her predecessor. The consequence was that George was much more dangerous than the ordinary flirt of society. He felt what he said, and the genuineness of his feelings made an impression by its very truth. Girls and young married women could not guess that though his love might be deep and true it was as evanescent as the rainbow, and that therefore its very depth was only an additional trap laid unwittingly, but baited with that which no art could supply. George had therefore been more successful with the fair sex than many men starting with more advantages. For he was not really good-looking: some even considered him almost ugly. He was a little above the medium height, well-made and muscular; his face, however, was irregular, without any really good features except the eyes. A large nose, a fair beard, no complexion at all, and ragged brown locks were scarcely redeemed by a pair of deep-set black eyes, of which the colour was in singular contrast to the hair and beard. Although he was, as already observed, a dandy, there was always some slight irregularity in his costume, either proceeding from design or accident. Either his collar was crooked, or his hat was on one side, or there was a button missing; in short it always seemed that notwithstanding the greatest efforts, George Latchford could never attain that supreme regularity,

symmetry and neatness, exemplified in the majority of England's young swells.

During this lengthened digression the hounds have been trying to recover their fox. But all attempts have hitherto failed, and every one, even Miss Clarke, amused as she is by George's talk, begins to be impatient. At last the scent is hit off—at first hesitatingly, for it has begun to get cold; then with more assurance and louder music; and in a few minutes more they are off, running well together, and almost mute. The fox, tired with the first burst, has been lying in a dry ditch, some distance behind the point where the first check occurred; then finding that the hounds have tried back, and that his refuge was soon to be discovered, he has sneaked off to the right, hoping that his tortuous course would baffle the keen noses of his pursuers. But they make it out much faster than is convenient to Reynard, who soon again begins to hurry, trying to get off the open moor into a more enclosed country, where he is likely to have a better chance in the copses, hedgerows, and plantations.

"By Jove, his point is Beauclere!" calls out an enthusiastic sportsman. "Mr. Thornton, you will be having us galloping across your park, and spoiling your turf."

"And very welcome too," answers Cap, as he steadies his horse to jump the little stone wall which marks the boundary of the moor. "I hope you'll kill him in the drawing-room. Some fresh blood would do the old place good."

Cap looks round for his charge; but Miss Clarke is already some distance in front, riding well abreast of the hounds, but clear of them, and accompanied by George Latchford, whose opinion of Lettem's old hunter has been gradually improving. They cross some ploughed land and a few small grass fields, separated from each other by those formidable banks and ditches which often make riding to hounds in Blankshire an impossibility. But there is a convenient line of gates through which the huntsmen and "Hat" Thornton show the way; the latter always holding the gate back for George, who lets Miss Clarke

through, and then gallops on with them. The fox scarcely runs straight: there are occasional short checks, but, on the whole, they keep going pretty fast until they reach some iron hurdles bordering a wide expanse of grass studded with fine trees.

"This is Beauclere Park," says George to Edith, as he holds open a small bridle gate, "and if the fox runs to Holmewood, we are done, as it is nearly a mile round by the gates."

They anxiously watched the hounds as they tore over the grass, which carried a burning scent. Will they turn left-handed or run straight? On the left are high park-palings, taller than the heads of the riders, interrupted only by the ditch and wall encircling the churchyard. On the right, some distance off, are the house and gardens; there is a way out through the latter, but if the fox runs for Holmewood, though the hounds may get to him, the horses cannot. For a few hundred yards the pack runs straight as a die towards the shrubberies; but long before they are reached they turn to the left, and in another minute are struggling over the high wooden palings, some trying to jump them and falling back, others, more experienced and sensible, leaping the ha-ha, thus reaching the top of the churchyard wall, along which they run till they can clamber over the palings.

"It's a big jump, Miss Clarke," says George, as he catches hold of his horse's head; "do you think you can get over if I give you a lead?"

"Oh, yes! go on, Mr. Latchford," she replies; "it *does* look big, but I daresay I can manage. Any how, go on!"

George is never wanting in pluck when he rides for the gallery. The ground before him slopes off gently to near the foot of the wall, and then falls rapidly; forming a wide ditch with a nasty row of spikes at the bottom. The old wall rises to five feet or so on the far side; you have to jump up only, for the church-yard is on a somewhat higher level. The huntsman has stopped, and is looking to the right; some others are already galloping as fast as they can towards the house in order to get round. So George has no one in front to take the shine

out of him. He sits well back, sets his teeth, and straight at it, just as Cap cries out, "Don't ride at that, Mr. Latchford, you'll fall back on those spikes."

But it is too late. The good grey has risen to the leap, and with a slight scramble, lands safely on the grass at the top of the wall. Cap, though fearful for others, is not afraid for himself, and, turning his old stager back, he rides at it at the rate of fifty miles an hour, landing well inside the wall. Edith does not hesitate to let her horse try, and just manages to save herself from a very nasty fall. The others, including Hat Thornton, rush away to the right.

"Well done, Miss Clarke!" cries Cap. "He is a good old horse when he's got a straight rider on his back. Now let's try to get out of this beastly place."

They leave the church on their right, and trot along the gravel walk towards the gate, which leads into an unenclosed road close to Holmewood, the fox's point. Alas! the great iron gate is locked, and they must either jump the ha-ha again (which is worse on this side), or give it up. Cap, on this occasion, takes the lead, and though his horse comes down on his head, and shoots his rider into the middle of the road, the dangerous spikes are cleared, and Cap has not lost his hold of the bridle. "Take care," cries he, as he scrambles into the saddle, "it is a slippery place;" and then his love of the chase makes him forget all about his charge, and he tears down the road to Holmewood, into which the hounds have already plunged. George takes a short run, and lands safely in the road, where he pulls up. "Now, Miss Clarke, put him at it," he calls out; "give him a touch of the spur!"

But Lettem's hunter declines to make an effort. He probably knows more about the doubtful condition of his own forelegs than his fair rider. He was willing enough to jump up, but he resolutely refuses to jump down, and Edith becomes conscious, to her dismay, that he is beginning to trample on the graves, a sacrilege which up to that time they had all carefully avoided. "Please go on, Mr. Latchford," she said,

"He resolutely refused to jump down."

"the hounds are running through the wood; don't lose them; you and Mr. Thornton will have it all to yourselves. Some one will open the gate for me by and by. *Do* go on!"

"I shan't," answered George, impulsively as usual; "do you think I care about the hounds when *you* are not with them?" And seeing that the old horse persisted in his refusals, he added, "Don't try him again, it's no use. He might kill you on those spikes. Wait a minute, I'll come back."

Then, not heeding her entreaties to follow the hounds, George Latchford did in cold blood what scarcely one of the hard riders of the Blankshire would have ventured in the excitement of the chase. As it was impossible to jump up from the road on to the wall, he trotted along the short approach to the iron gate, and deliberately sent his horse at it. He was wont to declare that Springheels never refused, and certainly Springheels acted up to his master's assertion. He made a bold attempt to buck over the gate. It was in so far successful that he *did* get over, but not without catching both his hind legs in the top bar, and falling heavily on to the gravel of the path.

There was a shriek from Miss Clarke, then, for a moment, dead silence, as the horse lay prostrate on his rider. Both appeared stunned, but the stillness was only momentary. Springheels scrambled to his feet, still dazed and shaking all over, his knees and hind legs bearing serious marks of the fall. George pulled himself up, bleeding from a flesh-wound in his cheek, and slightly confused, but otherwise unhurt. Edith was off her horse in a moment, and seeing the blood, exclaimed: "Oh, Mr. Latchford, you are dreadfully hurt! How could you? What can I do?" George, however, never forgot his *rôle*, for it was part of his nature.

"There is nothing the matter, Miss Clarke," he answered, wiping the blood from his face, "and if there were, it is quite worth while. Who would not jump a dozen such gates to get near you?" Edith thought that she had never seen any one look so handsome, notwithstanding the wound, perhaps because of the wound. There he stood, his bridle over his arm, the

stephanotis still unhurt and unfaded, his expressive face animated by the excitement of the chase, his black eyes full of the deepest admiration for her, and looking straight into her face.

"How can you risk your life in such a foolish manner?" she continued. "Why you could have talked to me from the road till some one came, or you could have fetched the verger with the keys—that would have been much more sensible," but even as she spoke thus slightly, her lips trembled, for the blood was still flowing down his cheek, and his handkerchief was soaked.

"Darling," he cried, taking her hand, "beautiful darling! how could I help it? I wanted to get near you! I would give a dozen lives, if I had them, for an hour of your sweet presence."

"How dare you speak to me like that, Mr. Latchford?" asked Edith, flushing indignantly. "Why, I have only known you about an hour!"

"Have you never heard of love at first sight, Edith?" replied he, still endeavouring to staunch his wound; "that is my case. I cannot help telling you that you are the most beautiful woman I ever met—that I love you above everything! If you turn away in anger, so much the worse for me; but I must tell you that I adore you, even if I were to die for it directly."

And suiting the action to the word, George did without acting the very thing that the most consummate actor would have suggested: he fainted. Nor was it a pretended faint; a sudden sickness came over him, the result of the concussion rather than of loss of blood, and reeling for a moment, he fell on the grass, and slackened his hold on the reins.

All Edith's indignation vanished as if by magic. She was frightened, but no longer angry; she knelt down by his side, and tried what she could, by fanning him with her tiny handkerchief, by words, and by squeezing his hands, to recall him to life.

"Oh, how dreadful!" thought she. "Here is this dear man, the very nicest I ever met, going to die in the churchyard, and no one is there to help. Oh dear, oh dear, what will they say? And he killed himself all for me! Oh, I wish some one would come. Oh dear, oh dear!"

And she fell to crying, like every girl would under the circumstances, as if that would mend matters.

But help was at hand. A gentleman in clerical attire appeared at the gate. "Who is this desecrating the churchyard?" cried he, as he saw two horses quietly nibbling the green grass from the graves. "What is this disgraceful behaviour?"

Edith looked up, and called out in a voice choked with tears: "Don't talk of desecration, here's a poor man dying. Get him help, and let us out."

The clergyman, having unlocked the gate, drew nearer and raised his hat. "I beg your pardon," said he, "I did not see that there was a lady here. What has happened?"

"Never mind what has happened," answered Edith, snappishly; "don't you see that this gentleman is dreadfully hurt? Help him first, I will tell you what has happened by-and-by."

Now the curate, though naturally sensitive about his churchyard, was not quite stupid and not quite inexperienced. He therefore at once ran off for some water, which he dashed over George's face, and in a very few minutes our hero revived. His first words were, as he clasped Edith's hand, "My own love!"

"Hush," said she, "here is the clergyman who will take care of you. Are you better?"

In a moment George grasped the position. But he also perceived (which he had, strictly speaking, no business to perceive, having just recovered from a fainting fit), that he had established an understanding with Edith.

"I am very much obliged," he said, rising. "Will you give me a drink of that water? Thank you, I am all right now. I am really extremely sorry, Miss Clarke, to have made such an exhibition of myself. Can you forgive me? I really could not help fainting."

"Oh, Mr. Latchford! Of course I have nothing to forgive."

"Nothing?" asked he, archly. "I am very glad indeed. So ho, poor old Springheels," said he, as he looked at his horse, "one knee badly cut, I see, and his hind legs knocked about.

Dear fellow!" and then he proceeded to wash Springheels' wounds, while the curate patiently held the pail for him, wondering. Fortunately the horse's injuries were much less severe than they at first appeared. The cut on the knee was trifling, and beyond a slight over-reach and a bit of skin off his side, there appeared to be no harm done. "Springheels is all right, Miss Clarke," said George, when the examination and ablutions were completed. "Do you know where the hounds are?"

"Indeed I don't," answered she.

"What a pity you missed them! There is another offence I have to apologise for. Have *you* seen them, sir?" inquired he of the parson.

"I? Of course not. I know nothing of hounds."

"Well, there would be no harm if you did, you know," answered Latchford; "sporting parsons are very good fellows. Now, Miss Clarke, shall I help you on?"

Edith was taken aback by his coolness just after what she thought a miraculous escape from sudden death.

"I will get on again," she replied, "but I shan't try to catch the hounds. And I am sure you must not!"

"Well," answered George, "I must go home for Springheels' sake. But that is no reason why *you* should lose the rest of the day. It is only two o'clock."

But of course persuasion was useless, and although George knew very well that the whole field would be discovered at Beauclere, only a few hundred yards off, enjoying Hat and Cap's hospitality, he took good care, after thanking the astonished curate, to lead Miss Clarke back to Farmouth by quite another way.

That the long ride home in *tête-a-tête* was not without some results may easily be imagined.

II.

"WHEN will you come and be introduced to mamma?" asked Edith, as Latchford and she turned into the High-street of

Farnmouth, which led down to the sea and Parade. "She will be so glad to know you. Are you coming to the ball at the Spa on Tuesday?"

"I shall be happy to be introduced to Mrs. Clarke as soon as I have made myself decent," answered George; "to-morrow afternoon if you like, as I am engaged to dinner to-night."

"Very well; come to-morrow after lunch. We are stopping with the Dormice, or I would ask you to lunch with us. And how about the ball?"

"I had no intention of going," replied he; "in fact I have to be in town on Monday and Tuesday; but of course I will come down by the afternoon express if you will give me a few dances."

"A few? *Rien que cela?*" asked Edith, smiling. "I don't know whether you can dance at all, so I must not promise too much. You shall have the quadrilles."

"The quadrilles? Thank you," said George; "that is hardly quite my form. There will be two at most in the course of the evening, and meanwhile I shall see you twirling round the room with a lot of other fellows, or, which is worse, sitting out in a corner with some handsome plunger. No, promise me the waltzes, and I will undertake that if I can't dance to your satisfaction you may throw me over after the first."

"That's a bargain, then," replied Edith, merrily; "it is a contract of which your conceit is the base. But here we are; don't forget, to-morrow at three," she added, "and take care of yourself. Have a warm bath, or something, and go to bed, for I am sure the fall must have hurt you more than you suppose. Have you anyone to look after you?"

"Oh, yes; I am stopping with my mother also," said George, as he helped her off her horse. "Good-bye!"

With a last friendly wave of the hand, Edith disappeared in one of the new houses on the West Parade, and George slowly turned off towards the stables. "The very nicest girl I have ever met," thought he; "why, even Laura Dashwood, that I almost broke my heart over, would not be in the same field with her. What lovely eyes, and what a pretty mouth! and can't she ride,

rather! That notion of mine to jump over the gate was a good one. Poor old Springheels; *you* are the only sufferer by it!" said he, as he stroked the gallant horse's neck. "Never mind, you'll be all right in a day or two."

It need hardly be stated that George was really no worse for his fall, and that the cut on his cheek, which was visible for some days, rather improved than disfigured him, at any rate in Edith Clarke's eyes. The introduction to her mother was duly accomplished; he found a handsome old lady, somewhat infirm, but talkative and easy to please. George did his best to produce a good impression, and undoubtedly succeeded. The Dormice, too, a large family of rather uninteresting people, were taken by his courteous manners, and by that light conversation on a number of various subjects, which comes so easily to a London man, but produces the effect of brilliant cleverness on people unaccustomed to the rush and rapidity of society in the metropolis. He was asked to dinner on that very evening, and after some discussion it was agreed that Edith should, on the next Saturday (this was Friday) ride his mare, Zephyretta, at Biggleston Cross Roads. The ordeal of the dinner—a severe one for a man of Latchford's critical palate—was passed through with rather less physical and mental suffering than he had expected, and on Saturday morning he appeared at West Parade with his man leading Zephyretta. Cap Thornton was, of course, to be at the meet, and would there act as official chaperon to Miss Clarke—a position for which his forty-five years, and his standing as an engaged man, were supposed to fit him. Mrs. Clarke, with some of the Dormice, drove to Biggleston to see "the hounds throw off." The day was not an eventful one. There was much cantering up and down woodland rides; there were a few short scampers across a couple of fields through convenient gates; a fox was chopped in covert, two more were lost, and Cap performed his functions admirably by resolutely riding into the thickest underwood to help the hounds, and leaving George to look after Edith. Warden, who was out, had no fair chance of talking to his friend, who scarcely left Miss

Clarke's side for a moment; he seized an opportunity, however, of saying:

"Take care, old man! don't break that girl's heart. Don't go too far, or I shall have to interfere."

"What are you thinking of, Warden?" asked George, blushing up to the roots of his eyes and looking very silly. "There's no harm done, nor likely to be done. Don't go and spoil a fellow's innocent enjoyment!"

"I hope it's all right," answered Warden. "At any rate you are warned," added he, significantly.

"All right? of course it is; don't bother, for goodness' sake: here she is."

There were some enquiries as to what had become of the two on the previous Wednesday, and Cap had to confess that he had left them in the churchyard to get out as best they could. Hat Thornton assured them that the vicar of Beauclere, instigated by the prim curate, would bring an action for trespass, damages, and sacrilege against them. As, however, it was notorious that the Thorntons were all-powerful in the parish, and that the vicar was one of their most intimate friends, this information alarmed no one. Latchford handed a couple of guineas to Hat for the poor of the parish, to be given in the name of Springheels, and after much pretended hesitation, Mr. Thornton accepted the gift, and undertook to mollify the irate clergy. Though there was no run to speak of, almost every one thoroughly enjoyed the day, which was one of those mild, bright ones not unfrequently vouchsafed to the southern counties of England, even in the depth of winter. We say "almost every one;" because George, though just as attentive to Miss Clarke as ever, and much more than attentive whenever the two were unobserved, was not quite at his ease. The reason of his discomfort will shortly appear; but Edith was by this time, as may be surmised, already in the state of mind which immediately precedes the condition of being deeply in love, and was therefore observant and watchful of her admirer. She noticed that he was occasionally somewhat *distrait*, and anxiously in-

quired, more than once, whether he was suffering from his fall. Every question on her part brought about a renewal of affectionate attention on George's, and when they turned homewards, which was rather early, he managed to banish all unpleasant thoughts, and to devote himself entirely to his charming companion. Edith was delighted with Zephyretta, and George urged her to ride the mare again on the day succeeding the ball. Of course she declared that she could not trespass on his good-nature; that she could not afford to buy the horse, and would therefore be satisfied with Lettem's nags, and so on; while he assured her that she was conferring the greatest favour on him by taking Zephyretta out, and so on.

The next day was Sunday, and George did not fail to appear at the church which the Dormice and their guests attended. There was the walk home, and an inevitable invitation to the early Sunday dinner, which George did not shrink from accepting, thinking, as he did so, that he had never made such a sacrifice for any woman before. A wet afternoon followed, devoted by the Dormice to sacred music, and by Edith to a prolonged conversation in the bow-window with George. The music drowned their voices, so we are unable to report their talk. In the evening our hero was obliged to take the mail train to town.

III.

Eight o'clock on Tuesday. The afternoon express from London is, as usual, late; on this occasion it is even later than usual. As it dawdles along the last few miles into Farnmouth, there is some one in a "first smoking" positively wild with impatience. He has had no dinner; he does not care to smoke any more; he fails to be interested in the railway novel lying open on the seat beside him: and he fumes incessantly at the unpunctuality of the London and Southern Railway.

"Confound it!" he mutters, looking at his watch for the twentieth time—"half an hour late already! These sea-side dances begin so beastly early, too. How can I get home, and

dine, and dress, and get to the Assembly Rooms before ten? It is impossible, and she will have given me up, and given away all the dances."

Of course this was George; George, who, in the intervals of looking at his watch and pulling down the window, anxiously examined a light deal box, about eighteen inches each way, which seemed to give him some relief from his impatience. But, as a great author says, everything in the world has an end, except Wimpole Street, and at last the train rolled into Farnmouth.

"Number three, West Parade," shouted George to the sleepy driver as he jumped into a fly—"and look sharp; I'll pay you well."

The half-starved old horse lumbered out of the station-yard far too slowly for George's impatience, and the distance to West Parade seemed interminable. They pulled up behind another fly, which was waiting at the house, and the servant opened the door so quickly that it was clear she had been in the passage.

"The ladies have not gone to the ball yet, have they?" asked George.

"No, sir; but they will be down in a minute. Will you wait?" answered she, opening the dining-room.

"No, indeed," he answered, slipping half-a-crown into her hand. "Give this to Miss Clarke before she goes, and see that she opens it."

With these words he handed her the deal box, and, bolting back into his fly, hurried home. Everything seemed to go wrong on that night. His mother asked him a number of questions which he had to answer; dinner was not ready, as they had given him up; and the servant had not put his clothes out. It was half-past ten before he at last ascended the steps of the Assembly Rooms, conscious that, having dressed in a hurry, his appearance was not what it might have been. Dancing was going on merrily, and the room was full. For a few minutes he sought in vain for the one who had brought him there, threading his way through a number of strange people, and treading

on the trains of ladies, who gave him anything but pleasant glances. At last, however, in a corner, behind a crowd of men, he observed a tall, fair girl, dressed in white, with violets on her shoulder, and in other appropriate places on her costume. It was Edith, and a flush of pleasure came over him as he noticed that she carried a magnificent bouquet of white camellias, with violets in the centre. He pushed his way through the men, among whom were Warden and the two Thorntons, the latter looking somewhat out of their element.

"Good evening, Miss Clarke," said he. "Have you a dance left?"

She held out her hand, giving his a distinct and warm pressure. For a moment she did not speak, while Warden and other men were pressing her for a dance.

"My card is quite full," she said. "Mr. Warden, yours is No. 7. Mr. Cap, I've kept the second quadrille for you. The Lancers? No, that is your brother's. Now, Mr. Latchford, this is our dance;" and, putting her arm in his, she moved off through the men, who fell back rather disgusted.

"At last!" she said to George. "I thought you were never coming!"

"Were you waiting for me?"

"Of course I was. How can you ask? Look at my card"—and she handed it to him. All except three or four square dances were marked with a little l.

"Who is the happy man indicated by the l.?" asked George, rather fatuously.

"Why you, of course," she replied, impatiently. "I *knew* you would come. How good of you to bring me that beautiful bouquet! It is the most lovely one I have ever had. I might have doubted; in fact, I *did* think to-day that you would very likely stop in London and amuse yourself, and forget all about poor me. But when Ann gave me the box, and whispered that you had brought it yourself, I knew that it was all right. I marked all the dances off except what I call duty ones. There's young Dormouse, and the two funny old men, and your friend

Mr. Warden, that is all. The rest are yours, if you will have them. But perhaps you are engaged?"

It need scarcely be observed that George was *not* engaged, nor need the remainder of the evening be described at length. Then followed another delightful day on Zephyretta, and on the Thursday George proceeded in high spirits to make an afternoon call (by appointment) at West Parade.

Rather to his surprise he was ushered into the dining-room, which was empty, and not, as usual, into the drawing-room up-stairs, wherein he heard the loud voices of the Dormice, and occasional peals of laughter. He sat smoothing his hat, without the slightest expectation of what was about to occur, and making pleasant plans for spending the rest of the afternoon and the following days with Edith; the door opened, and he jumped up with outstretched hands. But it was not Edith—it was her mother. He greeted her effusively; she bowed, and shook hands rather stiffly.

"I wished to see you a minute, Mr. Latchford, before you go up-stairs. Please sit down."

He obeyed.

"Edith told me you were coming to-day," she continued. "My daughter tells me everything." ("The deuce she does!" thought George. "Never mind, old lady; I rather doubt whether she tells you quite *everything*." But he only bowed.)

"Of course I can see, as well as everybody else, that you are paying Edith a great deal of attention,"' continued Mrs. Clarke.

"No more than your daughter deserves," interposed Mr. Latchford.

"Very likely not," remarked the old lady, drily. "But, at any rate, these attentions are very marked, and are likely to injure a girl."

"Such an idea is far from my thoughts!" exclaimed the unfortunate lover.

"Very likely," again said Mrs. Clarke. "Young men never have an idea of injuring girls; but they do it all the same. I don't wish to be rude," seeing that George made a deprecating

gesture, "but I must look after Edith. You, and many other gentlemen, don't think of the consequences of what you do; so I must do so for you. I do not intend my daughter to be talked about, nor do I wish her to break her heart for a man who has no serious intentions."

George jumped up, scarlet all over. "But, my dear Mrs. Clarke" . . . . . he began, "I assure you . ."—

"Sit down a minute, and listen. I'm a tiresome old woman, I know; but I won't keep you long. Edith, unfortunately, *is* already being talked about. There is no serious mischief done yet, I am happy to say, but it must not go any further. There are reasons why you must not dance and hunt with her any more. You may guess the reasons—or shall I tell you?"

"Who has been taking away my character?" asked George, struggling with his confusion. "I ought to know."

"I don't think any one has told a falsehood about you, if that is what you mean," replied Mrs. Clarke, quietly. "I have heard nothing against you. But you know to what I allude. Do you wish me to tell you, or will you promise to go back to town at once?"

"I cannot promise that," answered George, now quite cowed and very uncomfortable, "for my mother would think it extraordinary. But I will not call here again."

"Nor attempt to see Edith?"

"Nor attempt to see Edith."

"On your word of honour?"

"On my word of honour."

"Very well, that I think will do," answered Mrs. Clarke, rising to ring the bell. "When Edith is married, she and I will be glad to see you again;" she added, holding out her hand. "Good morning. *Good* morning."

IV.

GEORGE staggered into the street. Here was a collapse of his house of cards, of his pleasant prospects of a delightful winter, during which he and his horses were to be kept at his mother's expense at Farnmouth, and he would have hunting and flirting to his heart's content. For George, as has been already hinted, was not rich; and he could not afford a stud and a hunting-box in the shires. He felt conscious of having played a miserable part. But what could he do? Nothing. He trudged home, and declared his intention of returning to town that night on "important business."

Three evenings later he was sitting moodily sipping his coffee in the smoking-room of the Erechtheum Club. He was really "hard hit," and the separation from Edith affected him almost as much, nay, perhaps even more, than the loss of his pleasant hopes for the winter. He was thinking what he should do with his horses, and had just made up his mind to send them to Tattersall's—a measure which became all the more necessary as ready money was urgently required—when a letter was brought in. It came from his mother at Farnmouth, and contained nothing of importance except an enclosure, which, said Mrs. Latchford, had arrived for him that morning.

It was in a lady's hand, and ran as follows:

"What has happened? Is what they tell me true? Surely it cannot be. Yet why do you remain away, if it is false? You know you have won my heart for ever and ever. Could you be such a coward as to win it under false pretences? Surely not. But whatever be the truth, I *must* see you again. I know that you have promised my mother not to try and see me; but I send for you, so you are released from your promise. I suppose you are in London, and may not get this for a day or two. So I must wait; but do not make me wait longer than you can help. Meet me, if you can, the day after to-morrow evening at nine

o'clock on the pier. I am going alone to have tea with some friends. I will get away early, and make the cabman put me down at the pier gates. I shall expect you. Do not let people see you at Farnmouth before then. EDITH."

"The day after to-morrow!" thought George, looking at the post-mark; "that is to-morrow. I must go down by that beastly express." For he decided at once to go, though he knew it would be wiser to stay. He argued with himself that it would neither be chivalrous nor polite to keep a girl waiting for him at nine o'clock at night on the pier. He gave final orders about his horses before leaving London, and, punctual to his tryst, waited at the pier gates. Nor had he long to wait. In a few minutes a fly drew up, and Edith, closely wrapped in an ulster, took his hand to get out.

They walked silently along the almost deserted deck till they reached one of the glass structures erected to afford shelter from wind and rain. "Let us sit here for a little," she said, "Now," she asked, turning to him, and grasping his hand, "is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"Must I say it? Well, if you are not ashamed to hear it, why should I be ashamed to ask? Is it true that you have made love to me—made me love you, being already married?"

George answered nothing, burying his face in his hands.

"Speak," said she; "have at least the courage to speak."

"It is true," he replied at last, in a low voice. "But we have been practically separated for a long time," he added hastily; "my wife goes her way, and I go mine. And I cannot help loving you!"

"Oh! it is true, then! Oh, my dearest, my dearest," cried Edith, "how could you thus deceive me?" And she too hid her face, bursting into an agony of tears.

He tried, at first timidly, to console her, but finding that she continued to sob violently he at last took her unresisting form in his arms, and as her hat fell down, and she laid her drooping head on his bosom, gently stroked her fair hair.

"My dearest love," he said, recovering his faculties, "do you think that my grief is not great as yours? Greater, possibly, for I am linked for life to a being whom I cannot love, while you are at any rate free, and can marry some one you do love by and by."

"Never!" sobbed the girl, piteously; "I shall never marry any one. How can I ever trust any one after this? I thought you so brave, so handsome, and so clever. And you have used me so shamefully. Why, oh ywh did you do it?"

"I could not help it. I dritted into a wild passion for you, my darling, before I knew it. I loved you from the first moment I saw you, and before we jumped into that churchyard I felt that nothing the world can give would weigh against your sweet self. You must blame your beauty, your own fascination, not me."

"Oh, that is nonsense!" she cried; her sobs gradually ceasing under the soft influence of flattery. "If you had been a man of honour, you would have gone away at once."

"Honour, gentlemanly feeling, all gives way before the power of love," answered George, with gradually increasing assurance. "You were my magnet from that moment, and I was irresistibly attracted towards you. I tried to go, but could not. I took the train as far as Wimbourne Junction (this was true, only he had gone to look at a horse), and then could go no further away from you. I was drawn back to Farnmouth by your invisible but irresistible power. What was the conventional tie of an antiquated custom to one loving you with such intense passion? My darling, I loved you, and love you still more now. I found in you my ideal, the one being created by God Almighty to share my life! It was predestined that I should adore you, and I could not help it."

With these words he covered her face with kisses, which she, at first, accepted passively. After a time she asked, in very low tones:

"Do you really love me so?"

"More than anything on earth or in heaven," answered he, boldly, between his kisses.

"I am afraid I do, too. You have taken my heart away, and I don't know what is right or wrong," she answered, thoughtfully, sitting up and pushing him back a little. "I ought never to see you again—I ought to be very angry with you, and cast you from my heart! Duty, indignation—everything urges me. But—God help me!—I cannot!" And then she burst into tears again, and this time George's usual mode of consolation seemed less effective. "Do you really feel that you could make any sacrifice for me? Do you think you could give up wife, family, everything for me?" she asked, at last.

"I am sure I could, and would do so, gladly and willingly," answered George, as firmly as he could.

"Then wait a minute. Don't speak to me for a little—no, don't touch me," she added, as he attempted to put his arm round her waist. "Why don't you get a divorce?" asked she, abruptly.

George was somewhat staggered. But he managed to answer:

"Because—— Well, because my wife has not really broken the laws. And," he said, plucking up some little spark of spirit, "it is not her fault that we don't get on together. She is not to blame. We are not in America, where people can get divorced simply because they don't sympathise. Here there must be a public scandal and a great row and a law suit, which none of us would care about."

"No, indeed!" assented Edith. "That would be horrible! I don't think I could marry a man whose name had been in all the papers for a week."

"In America," continued George, "I believe they do these things very easily. You have only to go to the judge and say you don't get on with your wife, and the thing's done."

"Then," said Edith, suddenly turning her eyes fully on him, which looked fierce and determined in the flickering gas light, "take me to America, get a divorce, and marry me there!"

He was completely astounded, and could only stammer out: "Go to America?"

"Yes," she answered, "why not? I will make the sacrifice if you will. Or is all your love only pretended? Are you only a humbug after all?"

"But," he ventured to urge, "a divorce and a marriage would only be legal in the United States."

"Well, what of that? North America is surely big enough for us, or do you want to come back to your wife in England? We should be properly married there, and received by all the nice people. What should we want to come here for? Should we not be all in all to each other?"

George had not the moral courage to argue the matter. He raised some faint objections on the score of poverty, but when she at last said, laying her fair arm round his neck:

"George, I love you dearly, and I trust you. I will forgive what you have done, and if you love me as truly as I do you, I will give up friends and home for your sake. We will go to America and be married there. I will work for you, if you cannot earn enough yourself. Later, I must have some money, though I have but little now. No one can keep me out of my inheritance. Let not money stand in the way, if you really love me and are a man. I have a hundred pounds in the bank, a present from my uncle; I will send it you to-morrow. So now tell me, will you go?"

Need we say that George yielded? It was, after much discussion, agreed that he was to return to town at once by the early morning train, and make all preparations for departure; that Edith should accept an invitation she had had to stay with some friends in North Wales, and should, instead of leaving the railway at Chester, meet George there, and go on with him to Holyhead, whence, by travelling through Dublin, they could catch the outward-bound Cunard steamer at Queenstown before even her non-arrival in North Wales could be known to her mother.

"Then, if she does find it out," said Edith, almost bitterly, "I shall be compromised, and she will gladly let me go my way. I shall write to my friends to expect me on Saturday, but shall tell my mother I am going on Friday. That will give us two

days more, as they won't even wonder till late on Saturday evening, and there are no telegraphs open on Sunday in the country. Can I trust you?" she asked George. "Will you apply for the divorce at once, and let me live alone in quiet apartments till the formalities are complete?"

Of course George was able to dissipate these last scruples.

V.

Holyhead Harbour. A rough night. Two passengers, a lady and a gentleman, emerge from the "Limited Mail," and she rather anxiously looks round the deck of the jetty. There is no one about except the porters and sailors, and their fellow passengers, each of whom seems busy enough looking after his own belongings.

"We have not been followed?" whispers Edith (for of course it is she), as they move towards the gangway.

"Of course not, my darling; how could we be?" answers George, almost impatiently. "Come along."

In ten minutes more the "Connaught" is steaming out into the wild Irish Channel against a strong westerly wind. Edith is helped down into the ladies' cabin, and soon George, no more the bold impetuous George of churchyard fame, is groaning in the agonies of sea-sickness in the main saloon. In the intervals of this complaint, the passions being subdued by suffering, conscience is apt to awaken. So it was with George. A certain amount of common sense, which with him generally took the place of conscience, reasserted its sway, and he felt that he was doing not only a very wrong thing, but also a very foolish one. His prospects in America were, under the circumstances, absolutely *nil*. In England he had many friends, a share in a respectable business which only required attention to become remunerative, a faithful if not sympathetic wife, a kind mother, and money enough for comfort, though possibly not enough for his luxurious wants. He was popular, and could be sure of plenty of amusement and sport whenever he could spare the time. His lines had, in short, fallen in fairly pleasant places.

He was now deliberately about to cast away all these advantages, to cause the deepest grief to his mother, and a life of prolonged misery to his faithful wife. What right had he to act thus, to inflict such sorrow on those who loved him, and to whom duty and affection alike bound him? He was fain to confess, none! By eloping with Edith he was doing her infinitely more injury han he had previously done by his violent flirtation. He felt, as his passion was chastened by sea-sickness, that their life would not be all sweetness and love as they fancied. He had doubts on the subject of the divorce, which he knew would be a cruel injury to his wife, and a hollow mockery, even if obtained. He had still more serious doubts on the subject of a marriage to Edith, and did not at all relish the idea of becoming possibly guilty of bigamy. And then affectionate thoughts of his horses came over him. They were to be sold on Monday without reserve. Poor Springheels! he never would find another like him. But there was no hunting in America, so he might give up all hopes of ever donning his pink again. Such and similar thoughts crossed his mind, as his body was racked with the torture of sea-sickness. Over the sufferings of his fair companion in the ladies' cabin we must draw a discreet veil. But when at last, in the cold dawn of a winter's morning, the big steamer was laid along the pier at Kingstown, and a wan figure staggered up the companion, George hardly recognized the whilom bright girl of Biggleston cross-roads, and the beauty of the Farnmouth ball. Could this poor thing, with hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, and a trembling gait, requiring two men to support her, really be the dazzling maiden who had so fascinated him? Cruel as was the thought, for nothing but five hours' sea-sickness had caused the change, yet the thought flashed across him—is it worth while to sacrifice so much for her? A wicked, selfish thought, but then George, though not actually hard, was prone to occasional fits of cruelty and selfishness. He reproached himself instantly and hurried across to help her.

"I cannot go on," she gasped, "I *must* rest. I cannot stand any more railway just now. Can we not stop here for a little while?"

The waiter, as directed, brought in the bill, and then inquired "Where the gentleman would have the luggage taken to?"

"To the Holyhead boat," answered a voice behind him, "We are going back to England."

* * * * *

There is little more to tell. In the afternoon the following telegram reached Tattersall's, dated from Holyhead:

"Do not sell Springheels and Zephyretta." And at about the same time, a gentleman was bidding adieu to a lady on the platform at Conway.

"Then if your mother consents, you will keep Zephyretta for my sake?" said the gentleman.

"Yes," answered the lady; "write her a nice note and tell her your plan of going to the north, to hunt for the winter. I will take good care of the dear horse. Good-bye!" And they parted, she to get into a branch-line train, while he went on to town.

But an attentive spectator might have noticed that when the London train steamed out of the station, she looked after it long and wistfully, while the tears were quietly running down her face.

As to the gentleman, for awhile he sat back quietly. There was no one else in the carriage.

"Thank God!" at last he exclaimed, fervently; "thank God for that stormy passage. I am cured of flirting for ever!"

OUT OF THE HUNT.

IT is now several years since Jack Marden disappeared from the hunting-field and London society, and the painful circumstances which blasted a most promising career are still but superficially known to a few, while the many, if they recollect him at all, remember his name only in connection with a trial at the Midland Assizes. The real history of the affair has hitherto remained secret. As one of the most intimate friends of poor old Jack I was informed of everything that took place almost from the very beginning, and have hitherto told the story to no one. But there is now no longer any reason to observe secrecy, and feeling entirely absolved from any vow, whether express or implied, I think it is only fair to Jack to put the world in possession of the facts which deprived it of one who would probably have emulated the career of the "Squire" or of Assheton Smith, if his life had not been blasted by the events I am about to narrate. For obvious reasons, certain dates and names are altered.

I.

At that time, Jack Marden was a bold rider to hounds, and a capital "all-round" sportsman. The son of a wealthy manufacturer, who having retired and bought an estate, showed as much acumen in developing its resources as he had displayed in amassing a large fortune by his factories, Jack was able from the very first to cut a good figure among men of his age. He came back from Oxford, where he took a fair degree, with just sufficient amount of learning to make him a pleasant companion in the most cultured circles, and not enough to make him a prig or a pedant. A certain amount of worldly prudence, possibly inherited, had preserved him from the more dangerous of the traps which are always set to catch the eldest sons of wealthy fathers. He had spent money freely at the University, and continued to spend it equally freely in town and in the Shires, whither his tastes naturally led him in the winter, but he took care to get value received. No one was more open-handed than Jack when a friend was in straits: none more close-fisted than Jack when a swindler tried to impose upon him. No doubt he made a few mistakes at first in his selection of horses, and still more in his choice of grooms, but before he had been two complete seasons at Market Welton he was as well mounted and his stud was as well kept as that of any man in the still fashionable hunting centre. Railway communication was not as perfect then as now, and it took four weary hours to reach Market Welton from London. The "Crown" and the "Lion" were in those days the favourite *rendezvous* of the boldest riders of England, and both hostelries were crowded from November to the beginning of April. Although he could have afforded a hunting-box of his own, Marden preferred the good company and good cheer of the "Crown," and the late autumn of 186— found him installed there as usual. Both these inns were more like a club than would be possible now-a-days, and every one knew every one else stopping there. If a solitary bagman came that way, or even a respectable antiquary interested in the monuments of the

old church, he was immediately recognized as a non-hunting man by the landlord, who could sniff a sportsman from afar, and consigned to some stuffy back room where he was made as comfortable as any one can be in Coventry. A pleasant genial fellow like Jack Marden was sure to make many friends; nor did the fact that he was well off diminish their number. Jack would occasionally give some one a mount; but he was careful not to trust his horses to heavy men, nor to men without judgment. As a rule, he alone rode his cattle, and rode it well; not always in the first flight, which then, as now, was largely composed of "thrusters," but well to hounds, watching their noses and sterns more carefully than his fences, and alive to every indication which would help them to get on terms with Reynard.

At this time Jack was about six and twenty, and beyond a few flirtations of his cub-hood he had been more devoted to horses, hounds, and dancing *quâ* dancing, than to the fair sex. A "nice girl" had been to him a nice girl, and nothing more; one with whom it might be and was pleasant to chat for half-an-hour after coffee, or for even longer, in a quiet recess adjoining the ball-room, but no acquisition in the hunting-field. On the contrary, if report speaks true (and his own evidence goes far to confirm report) Jack declared that ladies in the field were a "d——d nuisance." As an excuse for him let my readers remember that far fewer women rode well to hounds then than now. Several fair equestrians had indeed appeared on the horizon of Market Welton during the previous season; but Jack always gave them a wide berth, rode his own line, and did not open gates for them if he could help it.

This much being premised, we can at last throw off, and endeavour to stick to hounds—that is, to our tale. One fine morning in December, Jack jogged thoughtfully out of the yard of the Crown—thoughtfully, because his cover-hack had a cough, and he was therefore obliged to start early and ride his hunter to the meet at Slingsby, some eight or nine miles distant. Hence he was alone—an unusual circumstance for

Jack. As he approached the cross roads where you turn to the right for Slingsby, he perceived a horseman trying to decipher the more than half-effaced inscription on the sign-post. The stranger was evidently also on sport intent, for he wore top-boots, white leathers, and a scarlet coat. As Jack came up he removed his cap in a grand semi-circular sweep, and asked with a somewhat foreign accent whether "the gentleman would kindly indicate the route to Slingsby." Of course Jack replied that he was going there, and would be glad to act as guide, so the two rode on together. Nor did they ride in silence. The stranger was communicative, and after a few common-places, produced his card case, with the explanation that he understood English people always liked to know to whom they were talking. The card bore a coronet, and the name Count Ferencz Proszeny. Jack was a little puzzled, as he was no wiser than before. He could not pronounce the man's name, nor guess at his nationality, and was therefore in a very awkward position. The awkwardness did not however last long; for said the Count: "I am a Hungarian, and have hunted much with our beautiful young queen—(he meant the Empress of Austria)—at Gödöllö. But I was anxious to see some genuine English fox-hunting, so I have come to Market Welton. My wife also likes hunting; and we have made a little tour at Brighton and Eastbourne to practise with the harriers; now we want to see some sport in earnest."

"He removed his cap in a grand semicircular sweep."

II.

Count Proszeny was as little like the traditional "foreigneering" sportsman as possible. His dress was faultless, and his seat perfect. If his knowledge of fox-hunting was limited, he was at any rate not ashamed to confess it, and though his years (he was nearer fifty than forty), and his figure, which was slightly corpulent, might be against his riding in front, still a very short inspection sufficed to show that he was not the sort of man to be left behind altogether. His horse was, perhaps, rather too heavy for those accustomed to the highly-bred cattle of the shires; but for a man of his weight, it was probably a fault on the right side. As they rode on through the grass lanes towards Slingsby, he informed Jack that he and his wife were, at present, taking Market Welton on trial, and not knowing how they would like the place, they had merely engaged a couple of rooms at the "Lion;" but that if he, and more especially if the Countess, enjoyed the sport and its surroundings, they would take a house next season and bring their servants. He expressed himself warmly obliged to Jack for his guidance, and more especially obliged when the latter told him, as some of the faster riders passed them on the road, who each was, and as much about them as was likely to interest a stranger. When Slingsby was at last reached, of course Jack paid rather less attention to his new friend, as there were so many older ones there to claim it. And as it was a very popular meet and a fine day, the attendance was large, so that the two soon lost each other in the crowd. Nor were a quick find and a rapid scamper over half-a-dozen grass fields, separated by large but fair fences, conducive to promoting the growth of intimacy. There was a check at a little copse, which the fox had crossed and recrossed more than once, so that a few young hounds ran "tail," and there was some little difficulty in getting them together. Some ardent spirits dashed forward on

a line which had been spoken to, but it was evident to the more experienced and more watchful that the fox had merely broken cover at this place, and had at once returned to the copse. Yet the hard riders were not to be stopped, and some of them had already topped the fence on the far side. The Count was not among these. Jack noticed him eagerly watching a few couple of old hounds on the extreme left. He looked a little excited, and occasionally gave vent to some half-subdued exclamation in his own tongue—but he evidently knew what he was about. Suddenly he looked round, and scampering through the copse to Jack, he exclaimed: "*Possama Lerket*; the fox has gone this way; I see him; please put the dogs on." Of course Jack knew better, and quickly, but quietly, gave the "office" to Summers, the huntsman, who had by this time been made aware of the line by the music of a few of his more trusted pets. Away went the pack at full cry, the Count and Jack alongside of each other, just behind Summers, but far ahead of the rest of the field. The first fence was easy; the next field was a very large plough, and hounds turned right-handed, the scent of course rather less than on the grass, but still holding well. Into this plough the Count and Jack jumped within six yards of each other, and the way the former came over proved once more, if proof had been needed, that he knew his business. But when after crossing the vast expanse of arable land, Jack collected his horse for a very awkward jump with a bad take-off, and landed safely on the other side, the Count was nowhere to be seen. Nor did he appear during the next twenty minutes. The fox was a shifty one, and hounds were baffled more than once; but thanks to the excellent scent they were able to stick to the line, crooked though it was. More than once Jack lost sight of them altogether, and rode by ear alone, while the field was scattered right and left over a wide expanse of country. The jumps, too, were more than usually disagreeable; not from their size, but from the fact that they were ragged, with bad landings, and worse takes-off. But the fox, though wily, was not a stout-hearted one, and after many short turns the hounds rolled him over in a

ditch on the far-side of a black thorn fence. Jack turned his horse to get a canter at it, and as he jumped over, saw, to his surprise, three men only with hounds; Summers the huntsman, Scarlett, the hard-riding guardsman, and his new friend the Count. How he got there was a mystery; but he certainly was there, forgetting his newly-acquired English manners in a volley of Hungarian exclamations.

After this, of course, Jack felt that Proszeny was a man worth cultivating, and to be respected rather than patronised. There was, however, no further opportunity of conversation, for the Count turned homewards, professing to have had enough for the first day, while Jack's man appeared in the nick of time with his second horse, as Jack's groom always did, while other men were looking in vain for their relays. In the evening, of course, the new comer was duly discussed at the Crown. No one seemed to know much more about him than Marden himself. Lord Reginald Bletchley, indeed, declared that he had noticed both Count and Countess arrive, and that the latter was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. But then Lord Reginald was young and impressionable, and the last lady he had beheld was always the most beautiful. So the men assembled in the smoking-room did not attach much importance to his opinion. Later on, however, two sportsmen dropped in from the "Lion." One was sulky and uncommunicative; the other, however, fully endorsed "Regy's" encomium. "A really splendid creature, a gipsy—an Andalusian—a moorish beauty; in fact, a houri."

"I thought houris were fair," observed Marden.

"Never mind, old man," answered his informant; "old Mahommed would have been glad enough to have had dark ones like that in his paradise. Egad, sir! her eyes burn a fellow like two red-hot pokers; I only twigged her for a moment, but she's a topper, and no mistake. Never saw such a queen-like walk, either."

"You are getting a little mixed, Blanshard, like your liquors," said Marden; "I dare say she is fat and forty, if not fair."

"Fat and forty, indeed," exclaimed Reginald and Blanshard, together, "wait till you see her! "And," added the gentleman from the "Lion," "she is going to Salter's Willows to-morrow, so you will all have a chance."

"Confound it," remarked Reginald, sentimentally, "I wish there were not such a lot of you idle, flippant fellows about. I'm awfully spoony on her already."

And then they gradually dropped off to bed, for a hard day's hunting is not conducive to late hours.

III.

Salter's Willows—an artificial covert, recently planted by Sir John Clowse, one of the hunt's chief supporters—was only an easy ride from Market Welton, and surrounded by some of the best pastures in the country. No special feeling of curiosity agitated Jack Marden as he cantered over in the morning with a number of other men from the Crown, nor did he share their anxiety to see the beautiful Countess. On the contrary, if he thought about her at all, it was only to express to himself a fervent hope that she would keep out of his way, and his own determination to keep out of hers. Fate, however, had decided otherwise; for scarcely had the party reached a little roadside inn, about a quarter of a mile from the Willows, when Count Proszeny at once rode up to him with outstretched hand, and greeted him warmly, thanking him with more than British fervour for the services rendered on the previous day—services which in Jack's own estimation were so slight as scarcely to require an acknowledgment at all. "Come," said the Count, "let me introduce you to my wife"—and Jack could not refuse; nor, in fact, did he object to make the acquaintance of the lady, except on the grounds that she might spoil his hunting. However, in another minute he was led up to a "fly," in the back seat of which reclined the Countess, enveloped in furs—for it was a sharp morning. "Thank goodness," thought

Marden, "she is only come to look on." But again was he doomed to disappointment; for as he made his bow the Count explained that his wife was only waiting for her horse to be brought out, and would then join the hunt. Telling the narrator of this, his first introduction, Marden was scarcely able to relate accurately the impression it made on him. He felt at once that he was in the presence of a woman more perfectly lovely than he had ever seen before; but whether the charm was in her eyes, her profile, her full face, or even in her manner only, this he was unable to realise.

"I have heard of you from my husband, Mr. Marden," she said; "you were very kind to him yesterday." And thus speaking, she raised her eyes and looked poor Jack straight in the face. Red-hot pokers, Reginald's comparison, flashed across his bewildered mind. Profane thought! and yet what could those orbs be compared to?—large, liquid, yet piercing; black as night, and deep as the vault of heaven. No, he had never seen eyes like them. Their glance was one of unfathomable meaning; but probably the Countess meant no more than she said—to thank Jack courteously for services rendered her husband. He muttered some unconnected words, of which the gist was that the Count was very welcome; and then, as he expressed it, made a great effort to pull himself together, and take a good look. The lady was evidently young, probably some twenty years younger than her husband. Only her face appeared above the thick wraps which surrounded her, but the face was sufficient to captivate even one more *blasé* than Jack, and less sensitive than Lord Regy. Those eyes, which all who knew her have in vain attempted to describe, were shaded by long black lashes, curving slightly outwards. Her nose was straight and short, but not in a painfully straight Grecian line with the broad white forehead. A sweet mouth, not absurdly small, but exquisitely shaped, was half parted, and showed pearly teeth, bright and regular. Her hair, tied up in a knot under a tall hat, was very dark brown, but not jet black, as might have been expected from her dark yet healthy complexion and deep black

eyes. The exquisitely chiselled chin showed a certain amount of firmness, and the whole impression conveyed was that of a sweet temper, not without strength of character. In the middle of his contemplation, Jack was aroused by the Count's exclaiming, "Here comes Regan;" and turning, he saw a groom lead up a thoroughbred, whose expanded nostrils and impatient movements proved his anxiety to "get away." The horse might have been a steeple-chaser; he was at least fifteen-two, well put together, short below the knee, but with that lean head and peculiar set of the tail which betokens breeding.

Jack was off his horse in a moment, and offered to mount the Countess, who, discarding her wraps, stood displayed like Venus rising from the sea, only that she wore the best fitting of riding habits instead of the diaphanous want of garment in which the goddess of love is generally portrayed. Had the Greeks, thought Marden, ever seen the Countess in a riding-habit, they would have clothed Aphrodite in Poole's or Stechelbach's best. But he doubted whether Venus had such a good figure, and perhaps he was right.

Declining his offer, the Countess stood on the step of the fly and beckoned her groom, who brought the horse round gently to the side of the carriage. Quick as lightning she seized the pummel as he passed, and was in the saddle before Jack had held out his hand for her little foot. Nor did she require much settling and arranging; the folds of her habit seemed to fall right of themselves, and there was none of that fidgetting, drawing down skirts, shortening of stirrup, and lengthening of curb-chain, to which he had hitherto been accustomed when mounting ladies.

"Thank you, Mr. Marden," said she; "I am all right; please get on your horse; I see that the hounds are moving."

And only then did Jack notice that she spoke without any foreign accent whatever. As she moved on to join the crowd following the "lady pack," he could not help saying to Count Proszeny: "Surely the Countess is not a Hungarian?"

"No," answered he; "she is the daughter of an Englishman, who married a compatriot cousin of mine, and who lives near Koloszvar. She was brought up almost entirely among her relations in Yorkshire, and only lived a very few years in Hungary." Then, Jack having remounted, after dirtying his hitherto spotless boots for nothing, they hurried after the fair Countess.

"You must do me another favour, dear Mr. Marden," said Proszeny." "My wife knows neither the country nor the style of riding. I am too old and too fat to pilot her; will you undertake the duty?"

Now if there was one thing Jack abominated more than another, it was to perform this function of pilot. A lady's pilot, he knew from experience, was most likely either to lose the run by his charge coming to grief, and his having to pull her out of some ditch, or, at the best, to be jumped upon if she rode straight. Still, when the lady turned to him and said, expostulatingly, "Oh, Ferencz, how can you trouble Mr. Marden? I am sure I shall do very well if I follow you," he felt that he could do no less than express his delighted willingness to accept the office; and perhaps it was not so entirely against the grain. For if the Countess looked lovely ensconced in her wraps in a hired fly, she appeared ten times more attractive to a hunting man mounted on a first-rate horse, whose impatience she was repressing with a light hand, and over whose every movement she evidently possessed perfect control. The matter was therefore settled to the satisfaction of the Count, who said:

"I am very glad you will take charge of my wife. I cannot ride as hard as I would like, as I am not very well just now, and had to return yesterday earlier than I wished. But I saw that you can ride, and know the country."

"Thank you," answered Jack. "Yes; I think I know it fairly well. But tell me how you managed to get up to hounds yesterday. I have been puzzling my brains about it ever since."

"Oh! that was simple enough: I had studied the ordnance map—a wonderful thing, that ordnance map of yours—before

starting, and though I made a mistake at the cross-roads where you saw me, I had learnt the various woods near Slingsby pretty well by heart. And after the fox broke from the little copse I reflected on them, and recollected the nearest on the south-west side, where he broke. I suspected that he would not turn to face the east wind, so I looked well round, and I saw a wood in that very direction, on the top of a hill. And keeping within hearing of the hounds, I rode that way through gates and through some handy gaps. I do not like jumping much; it does not agree with me. So my horse was fresh, and then, after a little while, I saw the fox doubling, and waited."

"Why," exclaimed Jack, "you rode to his point as well as if you had been brought up in the country."

"Introduce me, old fellow, will you?" said a voice at Jack's elbow—and Lord Reginald rode up, gallantly attired in the newest and brightest pink, with spotless white cords and boots in which a woman could have dressed her hair as in a looking-glass: a stephanotis in his button-hole, and a tiny cigarette in his hand. "Do introduce me to the lady," added he, imploringly.

Now hitherto Jack Marden had never had the slightest objection to presenting Lord Reginald to the ladies of his acquaintance, nor had he felt any qualms, if Regy, who was always head over ears in love directly, made the most burning declarations to a lady he had known for less than an hour. But somehow, he felt a decided objection to grant the favour now asked. He was inclined to refuse point-blank, and explained his objections to himself by arguing that Regy would give the Countess a very poor impression of English gentlemen, if, as was inevitable, he declared his passion in ten minutes. Yet it was difficult to say no, particularly as either the Countess or her husband, or perhaps both, had overheard the request. A happy thought struck him. "All right," said he. "Come round this side." And when Lord Reginald complied, he introduced him to the Count, instead of to the lady, and then whispered: "They are foreigners, you know, and abroad you always introduce men to the husband first," a fictitious extract

from the handbook of foreign etiquette which Regy swallowed with perfect faith, even though with something of a grimace.

What more natural than that the fluent Count should fall back to talk to Regy, while Jack was left to make play with the Countess? Two people on horseback *can* keep next to each other in a crowd by a little good will on both sides: three never can. So the unpremeditated trick succeeded perfectly, and Jack immediately began his duties as pilot by leading the Countess through a narrow path in the "Willows," and placing her at the far corner, where there was no one but the second whip. He fortunately escaped a rating from the master, who was looking another way, and managed to carry on a disjointed conversation with the Countess, his eyes wandering ceaselessly from the cover to the lovely creature by his side, and back again, divided between anxiety not to lose the fox and the magnetism which attracted him to that beautiful face and perfect figure. Regy meanwhile was riding up and down on the other side looking for them in vain, and pestering Dick Scarlett, young Pemberton, and all his friends with enquiries about the lovely stranger, whom most of them having seen had admired just as warmly, if not as demonstratively, as he himself.

There was a whimper, then another; then Summers was heard encouraging his beauties. "Get to him, Clara; get to him Primrose! Eugh on to him!" And then with a sudden crash as of a full toned band the whole pack burst into cry, as Reynard slipped out within twenty yards of Jack and the Countess, and stole away across the pasture, the hounds after him before even the whip could holloa. Good scenting days often follow each other, for before the fox had got into the next field it was evident that the scent was breast-high, and better still than yesterday. This fox, however, was a straight-backed one. From the very start it was clear that he meant going, and go he did. Summers, a couple of wily farmers, Jack, and his fair charge, got away on excellent terms: the rest of the field, however, was not far behind, for the covert, though very dense, was not a large one, and they came rushing through the little path and round

both ends of it before Marden had steadied his horse for the first jump, which was easy enough. "I hope she won't jump on my back," thought he as his horse rose to it, and yet the notion of *her* jumping on his back was not so atrocious as it would have appeared an hour ago. He need not, however, have been under any apprehension, for the Countess took the obstacle well clear of him some yards to his left, and as she galloped alongside of him across the next field merely remarked that she saw the jump was small and had therefore taken her own line.

"Confound it," said Jack to himself, after they had crossed a few more fair fences at racing pace, and he found his charge riding with the calmness and judgment of a veteran steeple-chaser, "I wish I were on anything but this brute Moth. The fox is going straight for Scantlebury, and I bet we shall have to cross the Owlston brook more than once. I'd sooner face a row of hog-backed stiles. What an ass I was to bring out a timber jumper to-day!"

Now Moth was certainly not the most reliable horse in Marden's stable. He had bought him at an Agricultural Show, where the horse's display over the artificial jumps had won him the first prize. But like many prize-jumpers, Moth was not to be trusted at water. He would jump any height he could look over, and his performances over locked gates had quite enchanted his master, and secured him a good place more than once. Water, however, was not his *forte*, and they were likely to cross a country intersected by water-courses. However, for the present, all went well. A slight check gave them a little breathing time, and this fired Jack with the hope that the fox had turned; but in another minute the hounds hit it off, and proceeded as before almost straight for Scantlebury. The ground was now becoming deeper, and the fences more ragged. A nasty untidy hedge with a ditch full of water on both sides very nearly brought Moth on his head, and Jack held up a warning hand. As he recovered his horse he saw the Countess turn hers round. "No better than the rest," thought he, "only a little more judgment; knows when she's beat instead of riding

"But slipped back into the stream."

on like a fool." He was again mistaken. She was only picking a better place. She rode at the fence at a very slow trot, and her horse just touched the bank and got over in two hops. Now, however, it was necessary to warn her. "We are coming to Owlston brook," said Jack; "it is a very nasty jump. I think we had better go round by the bridge."

"How far is it?" she asked.

"About half a mile on our left."

"Then go on, never mind me. You will lose the hounds if you leave them for so great a distance: they are running hard."

So they were, indeed; mute, and so close together that a "sheet would have covered them." They were racing with their noses down over the spongy meadows which fringed Owlston brook. The line of stunted pollards on its banks was now but a couple of hundred yards off, and almost before the Countess had concluded her last sentence, the pack reached the edge. A momentary swerve to the right, then an old hound jumped over and a young one in: the next minute the waving sterns were seen on the far side, while others were scrambling eagerly on to firm ground, and once more the welcome music resounded as they tore away faster than ever. Jack hardened his heart, ground his teeth, got Moth well by the head, and shoved his spurs into him. In a moment he was some lengths in front of the Countess, and keeping his horse going he resolutely charged the water. But Moth was not a free animal, and catching sight of the deep water in which the mottled sky was reflected, he started and stopped almost dead as they reached the bank. A moment's thought probably convinced Moth that he had better not refuse, as he had been more than once severely punished, so his dwelling was very short. But short as it was, it had spoilt his stride and destroyed the impetus, for leaping high in the air he came down heavily on the very edge of the bank and slipped back into the stream. As Jack went down with him a peal of silvery laughter smote his ears: it came from the Countess, who was taking the brook in her stride a few yards to the right.

IV.

"You must forgive me, Mr. Marden," said the Countess, as Jack rode up to the small group assembled on the smooth turf at Scantlebury. "You really looked quite irresistible as you slipped over your horse's tail into the water. I am sincerely sorry for your accident, and hope you will not bear me malice for my merriment."

The fact was that Jack's appearance even then, though perhaps less comical than when he took his bath in Owlston brook, was by no means calculated to inspire a beholder with admiration, nor even with respect. His lower garments were not only dripping, but also bore signs of the tenacious character of the soil at the bottom of the brook; while his hat, which had been saved from entire loss by the guard, was scarcely worth salvage. Nor was the water exactly warm, and the wind was decidedly cold. He was not, therefore, in a sweet temper; but when the Countess bestowed on him her bewitching smile, and held out her little hand, pleading for forgiveness, his face cleared, and he accepted the apology with his usual politeness. And the presence of Lord Reginald, who had got over the brook somehow, and was making the running as fast as he could while the hounds were trying to get on their fox again in the thick underwood of Scantlebury, made it imperative on Jack to appear as good-tempered as possible. He knew well enough that a man who sulks is ridiculous nine times out of ten, and a bore the tenth time; and he therefore cheerfully joined in the conversation, though his teeth were chattering, and he had "goose-skin" all over. The field now gradually came up, having crossed the friendly bridge; and offers of flasks were numerous; nor were they on this occasion superfluous. Meanwhile the hounds seemed to make nothing of it, scent failing almost unaccountably, as it sometimes does, and the prospect of another warm gallop appeared remote. Moth, too, was almost as cold as his

master; while second horses had not yet turned up. Under ordinary circumstances, therefore, Jack would at once have started for home; but he felt tied as if by a leading-rein to the fair Countess's side, and postponed his departure from one minute to another. At last the lady herself noticed his pitiable plight, and urged him to ride back at a gallop—a request in which she was backed up by her husband, and still more by Lord Regy, who told some dreadful stories of men who had died in a few hours from inflammation following a ducking in a brook. Whether the stories were genuine, and the advice quite disinterested, is an open question. At last, however, the Countess settled the matter.

"Go home at once, Mr. Marden, or I shall believe that you have not forgiven me; and come and dine with us at the 'Lion' to-night. We can't offer you more than a decent hotel dinner, but the Count and I will be delighted to see you at seven. Then we will tell you all about the run which I don't think we shall get, and you can tell us all about the inside of that nasty brook. But go home now."

Unwilling though he was, Jack thought it better to obey, all the more that the bitter pill of parting was gilded with the prospect of the dinner at the "Lion." So he turned Moth's by no means unwilling head, and galloped back to Market Welton, glad to get rid of his shivering fit by the rapid motion. Yet on reaching his room he felt far from well, and followed his servant's prescription—a hot bath, a hot cup of tea, and a couple of hours in bed.

Visions of the fair Countess flying over what Jack Spraggon calls "navigable arms of the sea" soon flitted before his closed eyes, and even Lord Reginald's dreams could scarcely have been of a more sentimental nature than his. True, they had something of the flavour of the booted field: yet were all the men in pink, the hounds and the horses, nought but accessories setting off the central figure—a dark-eyed brunette, in a tall hat and a habit admirably moulded to a full yet graceful form.

Jack's slumbers, however, did not last very long. By five o'clock he was in the smoking-room of the "Crown," impatiently waiting for the men to come in from hunting. Very soon Scarlett and young Pemberton burst in together, and called for their usual refreshment.

"Well, you *have* been going it with the fair Countess," cried Scarlett. "You're a sly dog, Jack. Why, we all thought you did not care for women. But there you are, a regular Don Quixote—so hard hit that you jump straight into the Owlston brook! Why the deuce didn't you take it a little higher up? you'd have got across all right."

"Love is blind," remarked Pemberton, sententiously. "Mary, do make haste with that B. and S. Of course Marden did not see the best place; he was watching that beautiful Countess. She is a wonderfully fine woman; there can be no mistake about it. I congratulate you on your good taste, old fellow. But what will the foreigneering swell say, if you go plumping into brooks after his wife?"

"Yes, by Jove," added Scarlett, "these Dutchmen, or Italians, or whatever he is, don't stand any nonsense; and the lady is not a professional beauty yet, though she licks most of them. Mind her husband does not call you out, and stick you on his rapier like a lark on a spit."

"What beastly rot you fellows talk!" said Jack at last, who had hitherto not been able to get a word in. "Why, I never paid the lady any particular attention; and if I did, I am sure she deserves it."

"Right you are," interposed Pemberton, with his mouth full of cold beef.

"But how about you fellows?" continued Jack. "Did you do anything more?"

"We pottered about Scantlebury for an hour, and they could not make anything of it. Then we drew Crawston blank, and got on a drag as we were jogging on towards Heysham wood. But the scent was beastly; in fact, there was none at all, and I believe it's freezing as hard as nails. So, after we had all [illegible]t

our toes chilled and our fingers numbed, most of us turned it up and came home. There's Regy. Hallo, Regy! where's the beautiful Countess?"

Lord Reginald, as he always did, blushed up to his ears, and muttered something about the nuisance fellows were who never would leave other fellows alone.

"You two will have to toss up as to which is to shoot at the husband and which is to run away with the lady," said Pemberton. "Now for it. I'll see fair. The one who guesses right shall have the choice. The loser to do as the other man tells him, call out the Count, and stick him or get stuck, as the case may be." And so saying he tossed up a coin in the air, and clapped it down on the table.

"Confound it," cried Jack, who was beginning to get savage, "why the deuce can't you leave us alone? It will be time enough to chaff when we interfere with *your* amusements."

"Yes," continued Regy, plaintively, "it really is not fair."

"Don't lose your tempers," advised Scarlett. "You shall have a run for your money, and there shall be no fouls or crosses. Now, which will you back, Pemberton? I'm for Regy, because he knows the course. Jack here is quite a yearling at spooning: he does not gallop a bit, but goes jumping into brooks. Five to four in sovereigns on Regy."

"Taken," cried Pemberton, pulling a small gilt-clasped volume out of his breast-pocket. "But who is to be judge?"

"Oh, Mills here," answered Scarlett, as another of the company walked in. "He shall decide on this day month which of the two has won. I'll book the bet. Make it fivers?"

"No, thank you," replied Pemberton. I'm not very sure that my brute will stay. Excuse me, Regy, I did not mean to call you a brute. But I think you'll be better over the T. Y. C. than in so long a race as this. However, I'm sure you'll run straight for my money."

But Jack had had enough of this conversation, which somehow jarred on his feelings. It would, of course, have been absurd to

object, yet the very tone which he had himself adopted for weeks past now seemed but little short of vulgar. How could he sit by and hear that admirable, almost angelic being discussed by a lot of flippant fools in the smoking-room? He could not, and muttering that he must go and look after his horses, he slipped away. Then, getting into a comfortable arm-chair in his own room, he thought that he would beguile the time with a French novel, but the adventures of Mademoiselle Entrechat, which had so amused him yesterday, failed entirely to interest him to-day, so that he found himself reading the same page over and over again without the slightest notion of its meaning—if it had any.

At last it was time to dress, and as the old church clock chimed seven, he sallied forth into the now rapidly drying street. For Scarlett was right and a frost was setting in. It was only a few hundred yards to the "Lion," and when he was shown into the snug sitting-room on the first floor of that inn, which the Count had secured for himself, neither the host nor the hostess had appeared. He had therefore ample time to look round, and noticed that the Countess had converted that far from æsthetic apartment into a very pretty retreat. An Erard oblique stood in one corner, an instrument which was certainly not hired at Market Welton; a small basket on the table was filled with camelias embedded in moss; on a devonport in the corner were writing-case and blotting-book of morocco mounted in silver, and a portrait of the Count in a pretty frame with doors to it was a symptom of conjugal love. Eastern rugs and skins of animals were littered about the floor in artistic disorder, while a couple of etchings on the walls had evidently been substituted by the stranger for the coloured prints from the "Illustrated London News," which had formerly decorated the room. Scarcely was this survey completed when the door opened and the Countess swept in. She wore a black velvet dress, cut square in front, and surrounded by a *guipure* which even Jack's unpractised eye recognised as genuine old lace. The creamy hue of her beautiful neck was admirably set off by the quaint devices of this, almost her sole ornament. A plain gold band round one slender wrist,

an equally plain gold chain round her graceful throat, that was all; yet no regal robes could have been more fascinating.

"I hope you are none the worse for your bath, Mr. Marden," she said, as she came forward with outstretched hand. "I have been ashamed of my behaviour ever since, and sincerely hope you have forgiven me. My husband has been reproaching me bitterly, but not more severely than I deserve."

Jack energetically disclaimed any feeling whatever on the subject, and assured his hostess that he was perfectly well, and happy to be there in her company.

"Have you brought Lord Reginald?" asked the Countess.

"No, indeed," replied he, "I did not know he was coming." This with something of disappointment.

"Oh, yes, I thought a *partie carrée* would be so much nicer, and my husband asked him to take pot-luck like yourself. Here he is, I think."

It was indeed Regy, ushered in by the head waiter. No pains had been spared on that toilet, beside which Jack Marden's unpretentious evening dress sunk into insignificance. That shirt front must have cost the getter up of fine linen an infinite amount of labour, while the minute tie was a work of art. The gorgeous *moiré antique* facings of Lord Reginald's dress-coat were set off by a Marshal Niel rose, which he had probably bespoken by telegraph from London; one hand was carefully gloved, while the other was effusively held out to his hostess. The Count came in just behind him; florid, fat, and voluble as ever. Soon all were at their ease, except the young nobleman, whose rapid changes of colour and confused manner betokened that he was hard hit indeed. Dinner was announced, and the Countess, taking Jack's arm, led the way into the next room.

"I am sure Lord Reginald will excuse my not going in with him," she said, with her usual sweet smile. "I owe Mr. Marden ever so much for his piloting me, and for having been the cause of his wetting. Besides," continued she, as they sat down, "Lord Reginald and I are great friends, are we not?"

The young man gave a glance of intense satisfaction and said, as if from the bottom of his heart, "Indeed, I hope we are."

"Yes," remarked the Countess, looking him full in the face as she sipped her soup, "Lord Reginald told me five times that I was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and then made me the most violent declaration. Didn't you, my Lord?"

Her poor victim did not know which way to look. What a gross betrayal of his infantile confidence!

"I believe you would have run away with me then and there, Regan and all," continued the Countess unmercifully; "at any rate you said so. Did you not, my Lord?"

The Count interposed: "Never mind Lucy, Lord Reginald; she is very fond of teasing. You will have your revenge bye and bye."

But the wretched man felt fit to sink into his boots, particularly when he saw Jack's look of amusement not unmixed with triumph. It was not at all fair, thought he; she gave him every encouragement on the ride home, and then having led him on, she made fun of him before her husband and another man. Jack of course was radiant, but wise enough not to chaff his rival now he was down.

What pleased him most during the dinner, which was a very inferior one, like most dinners at provincial inns in England, was that the Countess made scarcely an apology for it. When a turkey appeared almost done to rags, her only remark was a brief one addressed to him: "You took pot-luck, you know." She had no occasion to assure her guests that the repast was very different to what she would have wished to place before them, for, as a true lady, she knew that they knew it, and it was no more necessary to say so than it would have been to remark that water was wet. And the wine, at any rate, was excellent; nor did Lord Reginald spare his attacks on it, for he required some consolation after his severe snubbing. The conversation drifted from hunting to country amusements, balls, the opera, and French plays, finally ending in politics; and Jack noticed that while the Countess seemed at home and well-informed on

every subject which turned up, her great aim was to make her guests shine rather than to shine herself; so that even Regy did not appear to talk as much nonsense as usual. As to Jack himself, he was positively brilliant—at least he thought so.

After dinner, cigars and cigarettes were produced, and the folding-doors between the two rooms being opened, the Countess said that if they did not mind she would play to them while they smoked. Of course the proposal was received with acclamation, as all agreed that they did not wish to tell each other stories unfit for a lady's ears, and soon the weird strains of a Tsardas resounded from the rich Erard. Those taper fingers were as skilful on the keys of the piano as in playing with a horse's mouth; and the men listened in silence as the smoke-wreaths rose slowly above the table. She played various little pieces—no grand fantasia, nor any severe classical music, but snatches of national airs, a *Lied ohne Worte*, a dirge, a tarantella, and, in fact, anything that suggested itself. Then she stopped. "Do you sing, Mr. Marden?" she called from the drawing-room.

"I wish I did," answered he, throwing aside his cigar. "I wish I could prove how I appreciate your music. But I never could sing a note."

"Perhaps you do, Lord Reginald?" And Regy did. He had a very sweet tenor voice, of which the chief fault was that there was not much of it; but he possessed a correct ear, and his sentimental style eminently fitted him to sing such pieces as "Come into the Garden, Maud," or "My own true Love."

Jack's satisfaction vanished as if by magic. He was no longer playing the first fiddle, but had to listen quietly while Regy was throwing an immense depth of feeling into his sentimental ditties, and singing *at* the Countess in the most pronounced manner. When the two began a duet he grew almost fierce, and heaved a great sigh of relief when the Countess at last shut the piano down.

This was a signal for saying good night. The two walked home together, Reginald overflowing with his admiration, Jack silent.

The latter declined to join the party in the smoking-room, and retired at once.

"I am seriously in love with this man's wife," said Jack to himself as he slowly undressed. "I know it, and I ought to go away at once, or harm will come of it. I will go to town to-morrow."

V.

THE next morning Jack's servant appeared about eight o'clock, carrying a pair of boots of which the tops had, after infinite labour, been browned to the exact tint then fashionable.

"Eight o'clock, sir," said Miles, making as much noise as he could so that his master should not drop off to sleep again, "and a fine hunting morning."

"What?" asked Jack, drowsily; "isn't it freezing?"

"Not a bit of it, sir," replied Miles; "looks rather like rain, but I think it 'll hold off. Hounds are at Parkington, sir, fourteen miles away, sir; his Lordship sent word as the dog-cart would be round at half-past nine."

This decided the question. There was no more thought of going to town. The good resolutions of overnight were forgotten, and Jack tumbled into his tub with the determination, founded on philosophic induction, that he must stop and face the danger, if danger there was. "Ridiculous to be afraid of a woman," thought he: "she won't eat me, and I shan't get her into mischief: she is far above that sort of thing. Why should I not enjoy myself as long as I can? Why should I allow absurd scruples, which would stop neither Regy, nor Scarlett, nor Pemberton, nor any of the other fellows, to prevent my having a good time of it. I should think the Countess knows how to take care of herself by this time." Such or similar were the arguments he held to himself, and by their help he succeeded in thoroughly quieting his conscience. But when, after a long and rather damp ride, he and Regy (who bored him to death *en route* with enthusiastic eulogiums on the

Countess) reached Parkington, the fair object of their admiration did not appear. The distance was too great or the weather too bad: neither she nor her husband joined in the sport that day. And a thoroughly bad one it was. Heavy showers and a muggy, mild atmosphere; no scent, and few foxes. The whole party from Market Welton rode home early in a depressed frame of mind, and Jack almost caught himself regretting that he had not gone to London. However, in the smoking-room of the "Crown" he found the Count, who was waiting for him, and who talked incessantly while Jack was attempting to neutralize the moisture of his clothes by warm liquids applied internally. The end of the conversation was that the two walked off under a big umbrella to have a look at the Count's horses, and while they were examining them, feeling their legs and going through the various performances well-known to a hunting-man, the Countess herself appeared in the stable, attired in a waterproof suit appropriate to the weather.

On this occasion—perhaps for the first time in his life—Jack fished for an invitation. He hung about the place, made flattering remarks about Regan and Goneril, the two hunters specially reserved for the Countess, and talked about horses in so scientific and interesting a manner that finally his friends could not do otherwise than ask him to stop to pot-luck again. He was the more delighted at having succeeded in his object that Lord Reginald was not of the party. But once more he had the opportunity of verifying the truth of old saws; for the four of the previous evening were better company than the three of to-night. The Count thought himself obliged to talk, and talk he did, till poor Jack was perfectly weary, and returned to the "Crown" and to the sodas and B.'s of the smoking-room with almost a feeling of relief, and certainly with an unexpressed sense of injury. He felt that the husband had had no business thus to monopolise the conversation, and ought to have allowed him to make love to the wife. Perhaps his thoughts did not shape themselves quite in so concrete a form: but their gist was to this effect. The lady had been gracious and charming as

usual, but nothing more. "What more," grumbled Jack to himself, "could she do when that chattering fool of a husband was by?"

The next was a Sunday, and therefore a non-hunting day. Hitherto Jack's Sundays had been spent like those of a good many of us when we are away from Mrs. Grundy, in reading the sporting papers of Saturday till lunch time, and then sleeping and writing a few necessary letters till dinner, of course with occasional turns to the stable. But on this Sunday he turned out in full go-to-meeting clothes, and patronised the fashionable old church of Market Welton, which its inhabitants would so dearly have liked to see elevated to the rank of a cathedral. Regy was also there, more resplendent than usual, his tall hat a miracle of glossiness, and his frock coat without a crease. Both were, *sit venia verbis*, egregiously sold, as the Countess did not appear, and the sermon was as long as it was dull. After lunch both were in doubt as to the proprieties, though neither confessed his difficulties to the other. Should they call on the Count and Countess? Jack thought that the least he could do after two dinners was to pay an afternoon visit—yet possibly an invasion might displease them on Sundays. Finally, however, he donned a new pair of gloves, and walked across to the "Lion," on the threshold of which he met Regy, who had also made up his mind privately to the same effect, and had dropped into the bar on his way to strengthen himself for the occasion. It may easily be imagined that an afternoon call paid under these circumstances did not afford intense satisfaction to Jack, although the Countess was very gracious, and his conversation with her, which turned on many subjects and scarcely touched hunting, proved that she was an extraordinarily intelligent and well-informed woman. However, no incident worthy of comment took place, and the next few hunting days only served to develope still further Jack's admiration for the lady. Of course, very soon both she and her husband made friends with a good many members of the hunt; but the scent continued poor, and there were no great runs; Jack had therefore many opportunities of talking to her while

riding by her side from covert to covert, or galloping for a field or two after hounds who always threw up. They soon came to a mutual understanding on the sore subject of piloting; she confessed that she did not require a pilot, and he admitted that he was scarcely qualified to give her leads; they therefore rode together *en bons camarades*, sometimes one being in front and sometimes the other, and Jack always ready to help with his knowledge of the country when circumstances required it.

But though he fell into no brooks during the next week, he sank deeper and deeper into the mire. Before the Thursday came—a Thursday destined to be eventful in his life—he was fain to confess to himself that he loved the Countess with heart and soul. He dreamt of her when he slept; his thoughts were turned only to her when he was awake. Even his horses interested him only inasmuch as they were conveyances by means of which he could be near her. Moth, Highflyer, and dear old Gander himself, the quickest and safest of hunters, were only useful because they enabled him to keep pace with the fair Lucy on Regan or Goneril. Incessant chaff pursued him when he joined the merry party in the hunt-room; and he withdrew from the company of his friends more and more, seeking the solitude of his own chamber when he was not at the "Lion," or executing trifling commissions in the town for his lady-love. Lord Reginald, to use his own expression, "was not in it." At the meet, the Countess's first smile and her first greeting were for Jack; Jack fell into a place by her side as naturally as if he had been born to it, and she accepted his company as if he had been her brother, only a little more warmly. How much was said behind his back Jack only knew later: meanwhile the way in which he received the banter of his companions was scarcely genial, and he became more and more wrapped up in his devotion day by day.

On that Thursday the long expected frost came. The ground was covered with snow on Friday morning, and hunting was out of the question. The Count suggested a few days in London; the Countess warmly approved of the proposal, and leaving

instructions that the state of the weather was to be telegraphed them daily, all three started by the 4 p.m. express for the metropolis. Jack had to stop at his father's house, for decency's sake. Count and Countess Proszeny went to Morley's.

"We think of going to the play to-morrow, Mr. Marden," said the Countess, as they separated at King's Cross; "will you come and dine with us at seven, and then take a seat in our box? Ferencz will get one in the morning."

Need it be said that Jack accepted with delight, regretful only that his own family duties and various visits which the Countess said she had to pay to her friends, her dressmaker, and her milliner, prevented him from seeing her sooner.

At the time appointed Jack Marden duly appeared at Morley's, where a dinner was prepared of a somewhat superior class to those of which he had partaken at the "Lion." They were talking of the piece they were going to see—"Our Boys," at that time in the hey-day of its popularity—when a telegram was brought in and handed to the Count, whose face fell when he read it.

"I am afraid I cannot go to the theatre," said he, passing the despatch to his wife. "Read it, Lucy. You see I must go at once to the Austrian Embassy."

"Certainly," said the Countess, having perused the pink paper. "There is no help for it. What a bore!"

"Never mind," observed the Count, his good humour returning. "Better get it over. I am sure you will be good enough to take my wife to the theatre, will you not Jack?" For by this time they had become so intimate that Count Ferencz never addressed our friend otherwise. "I will join you later on if I can; if I don't appear, bring her back here."

"Of course I will do whatever suits madame," answered Jack, in a half-way condition between nervousness and pleasure.

"Oh, yes! by all means let us go," said the Countess. "It would be a thousand pities to waste the box. Besides, probably Ferencz will soon get away and join us."

So it was arranged, and as soon as dinner was over, Jack

carefully wrapped up the Countess in her furs, and helped her into the carriage which her husband had provided for the occasion. To sit in a brougham beside the woman one loves above everything on earth, and to keep quiet and talk commonplaces, is a sore trial to any man; it was so to Jack, who for the first time felt a real *grande passion;* however, it was soon over and the publicity of the theatre saved him from further torture. Their places were in the stage box on the grand tier; they were therefore in full view of the whole audience, and almost before they were seated Jack had recognized Lord Reginald, Colonel Scarlett, Mr. Pemberton, and a number of other acquaintances in the stalls. That the opera-glasses of all the gilded youth in that portion of the theatre should be directed at the Countess was not surprising, considering her extraordinary beauty and her exquisite *toilette;* for on this occasion she had discarded the extreme simplicity assumed at Market Welton, had donned a dress in the latest fashion, and had decorated her dark hair with a magnificent coronet of brilliants. That after the first act every man who boasted even a bowing acquaintance with the Countess should knock at the box and present his respects was not surprising either; but it was scarcely pleasant to Jack, who not only found his *tête-à-tête* constantly interrupted, but had also to make the best figure he could to such whispered remarks as, "Lucky dog!" "What have you done with the Count?" "Sly beggar, you," "Wish I were in your place," and so on. When the play was over, and the carriage at last secured, he could scarcely have told what it was all about. All he knew was that he had been sitting next to a woman whose loveliness was all absorbing, whose charm was universally felt. He had laughed when she laughed, and had been serious till she smiled; but he had been watching her expressive mouth, her rounded shoulders, the rise and fall of her sweet neck, instead of looking at the antics of Messrs. James and Thorne. When they reached the hotel they were informed that the Count had not yet returned.

"Come up and wait for him," said the Countess, quietly,

leading the way to their sitting-room, "and we will have some tea or anything else you please."

He followed her almost mechanically, and when she gave her orders to the waiter, it was some time before he understood that she was asking him what he would take.

"Oh yes, thank you, tea, by all means," he at last muttered; and the tea was brought.

But now he could stand it no longer. The long pent-up waves of passion burst the bounds of propriety and honour, and he suddenly flung himself wildly at her feet, as she was prosaically preparing to make the tea. "My angel!" cried he; "my adored one! I cannot help it, I must tell you how I love you! You are the most beautiful woman I ever beheld, and you are as wise as you are beautiful! What man could regard you unmoved? What creature not of stone could help loving you?"

"Mr. Marden!" said the Countess standing up, "what do you mean?"

"Oh, yes! I know what you are going to say, adorable Lucy! Of course I am trampling under foot every rule of proper conduct: of course I am mad. I know I am—mad with love of you; but it is a madness which will last my life, an insanity of which the only end is death. I do not care; call for the servants and have me turned out; spurn me, do with me what you will, nothing shall stop my declaring that I love you above everything on earth—above heaven itself; and nobody shall prevent my trying my best to induce you to share your life with mine." He threw his arm round her waist, and, as she turned her head away, he impressed on her neck a shower of kisses with all the warmth of a long-repressed passion, and continued: "My adored one! You know that your husband, good fellow as he is, is utterly unworthy of you! He does not understand that he has secured the greatest prize in the whole world; he does not seem to know that he harbours an angel. If ever pearls were cast before swine, here is an example. You do not love him; you cannot; such a thing would be impossible and un-

natural. What does he know of love, and of the charm of such a being as yourself? Come with me, my darling! I have never loved before. I bring you a heart unsullied by any vulgar passion; I am no *blasé* man-about-town. You are my first love, as you will be my last. Let us fly, my darling! Say, do you love me?"

At last the Countess succeeded in getting free from the arms of the man who had thus poured out his tale without an instant's intermission, and who was now almost exhausted by the flow of his own words, intermingled as they had been with his kisses, bestowed on her hair, her neck, her shoulders, and even her feet.

"Mr. Marden," she said, "will you do me the favour to leave me alone? Thank you! Now," she continued calmly, "do you consider me a perfect idiot?" He made a gesture of dissent. "It would almost appear so, for, unless you thought me a fool, how could you go on like that? Apart from any notions of honour or virtue which I had thought would have some weight with you, though it appears they have not, what a consummate goose I must be to listen to you for a moment! I have an excellent husband, older, indeed, than you are, but so much the more sensible (excuse my saying so; it is your own fault), a capital social position, and plenty of money. And you want me to run away with you, and lose caste, position, and everything? And you say you love me! Nonsense. I hope you only had too much wine at dinner, or the play intoxicated you. Let us say no more about it. Have some tea?"

Jack was abashed. He did not know what to say, or which way to look. He could not give her up like that, without the semblance of a struggle, and yet he felt that he was tremendously handicapped.

At that moment the door opened and in walked the Count. "Ah, my children!" exclaimed he. "I could not get to the theatre in time. Have you enjoyed yourselves?" And kissing his wife on the forehead he held out his loyal hand to Jack, who was almost ashamed to take it. "Lucy, dear, give me some tea,

in her discretion. Jack felt that it might have been possibly better to disappear altogether: how much wiser immediate flight would have been he did not then know. But he could not so easily cast off the trammels of the passion which enthralled him, and was wanting in the courage to run away. Though abashed by the reception his advances had met with, and ashamed of having made a fool of himself, it is to be feared that his feelings were rather of regret than of repentance. He felt that he had been clumsy and silly: he had not yet arrived at the frame of mind in which he could contemplate his conduct from a sound moral stand-point. He still argued that "they all do it," and that he must have been peculiarly awkward and particularly unfortunate to make such a mess of it. When Count Proszeny called for him at the "Crown," Jack very soon perceived that either he knew nothing of the declaration, or concealed his knowledge admirably; for there was no trace of embarrassment nor of any *arrière pensée* in his manner. He was frank, talkative, and friendly as usual, and scarcely seemed to notice that Jack replied to his remarks in monosyllables. There was a hearty old English welcome and a good old English dinner for them at Burrwood. But the conversation, which, in so mixed a company, started from hunting to wander over all sorts of subjects, from the state of Ireland to that of the land, and from the last extravaganza to the latest sensation trial, was not sufficiently engrossing to arouse Jack from his thoughts, nor to restore his spirits. He ate and drank almost mechanically, and it was only towards the end of dinner that the excellent champagne, of which he had partaken very freely, emptying his glass unconsciously as soon as the attentive butler filled it, began to take some effect on him. As a rule he was abstemious, though by no means a teetotaller. He was generally anxious to keep himself in good hard condition for all sorts of athletic sports in summer, and for hunting in winter: he therefore committed no excesses, and led the clean healthy life of many of those young Englishmen, whose strong limbs and iron nerves astonish the more effeminate aristocrats of the Continent. But to-night, as he felt the exhilarating effects of the

champagne, he continued to drink pretty steadily, and when the cloth was removed (as it still was at Burrwood), joined in the general talk with the noisiest of them. Cigars, and all sorts of spirituous liquors, including a steaming bowl of punch, were soon produced, and these scarcely contributed to steady poor Jack's head. When eleven o'clock arrived, the guests, many of whom had a dozen miles to ride or drive, began to talk of moving, and a young farmer, who had gone out to look after his trap, reported that it was raining hard. This was pleasant news to the hunting men assembled, though most of them had the prospect of a wet ride.

"How did you come?" asked Sir John of Count Ferencz, who had had the place of honour on his right.

"We rode," replied the Count, "and we have left our waterproofs and leggings in your hall. We shall get home all right."

"Oh," exclaimed Jack, who overheard the answer, "it's [illegible] of a ride: we will take the short cut, and shall be home in half-an-hour."

"You surely would not think of fording the Ooze on such a night as this?" exclaimed Sir John. "Why, it is not nice in the day-time, but it's beastly dangerous at night, unless you know exactly where to go."

"So I do," answered Jack, who had a certain amount of "Dutch courage." "We shall manage all right, shan't we, Count? You're not afraid, are you? It saves half the distance, and that's worth saving on a beastly night like this."

"I am not afraid," answered the Count; "and of course *you* know the country, Jack, and I don't. So I shall trust to your guidance."

"Indeed you had better not venture," remonstrated Sir John. "It really is not safe."

"I think I know the country as well as any man here," replied Jack, who was now a little piqued, "and if I can't get through that little brook without a mistake, you may call me the veriest duffer that ever thought he could ride. Never mind me; I know how to take care of myself and the Count too."

Mr. Aspinwall, the doctor of Burrwood, and one or two others, attempted to argue the matter with Jack, but it was quite in vain, for he was perfectly certain that he knew the road, and his obstinacy was increased by his condition, which was just that stage between sobriety and drunkenness, when a man is very positive and very confident.

As they emerged from the hall in their waterproof garments, Sir John took the Count aside for a moment, and suggested that he had better stop all night at Burrwood and let Jack go home alone, as he had expressed his determination to get back that night. This, however, the Count resolutely declined, saying that he was perfectly confident of Jack's knowledge of the country, even though he might be a little screwed. So, very unwillingly, Sir John had to give up any further attempts, and watched them disappear down the avenue with serious misgivings.

"Come along," said Jack, as the park gates swung behind them; "we shall be home in twenty minutes, for now the snow is melting we can gallop all the way."

After going down the road for a few hundred yards, they turned through a gate into a large grass field. The Count could scarcely see fifty yards before him in the drizzling rain and darkness, but Jack galloped along a ridge with perfect confidence, and Ferencz kept close behind him. His trust in his guide did not seem misplaced, for, turning off to the right suddenly, Jack pulled up at a bridle-gate, which he had hit off with the same certainty as if it had been broad daylight. Then came a wet furrow in a plough, a sharp turn round some ricks, and more gates, all of which Jack found and opened for his friend with hardly any trouble.

"We shall be at the Ooze directly now," said he, as he tried to open one of the series. "There is only one more field to cross. D—n it, the gate's locked. We shall have to jump it. Can you manage?" he asked the Count.

"Well, it's a very nasty jump to take in the dark, but I'll try, if you give me a lead."

"All right," cried Jack, "here goes!" And turning old Gander back, who had patiently watched his master's efforts at opening the gate, he rode him at it steadily. The old horse knew exactly what was wanted of him, and even the reason why; for he trotted up carefully to the obstacle, and then bucked himself over, landing comfortably on the other side. "Now come on!" called out Jack.

The Count was not wanting in courage, but he was no longer as young as Jack, was not in the strongest health, and had just risen from a heavy dinner. It was pitch dark and raining. That he did not enjoy this jumping practice was therefore not surprising. However he faced the difficulty gallantly, and shoving spurs into his horse, rode faster at it than he ought to have done. But he feared a refusal. Over came the horse, catching his hind legs in the top bar, and down came the Count on his head, close under old Gander's feet. Jack was quite sober enough to catch the Count's horse first, then to jump off and to look after his master. He seemed shaken, but declared that he was not hurt. After a minute or two he got on again, and they proceeded, the Count rather silent, Jack praising his pluck and determination. "Here is the Ooze," said he, as they entered a thick white mist, which was even denser than the rain through which they had hitherto ridden.

They looked down from the steep bank. They could just see the river running along in a swift black stream. "Oh! it is not so bad as it looks," remarked Jack. "I'll show you the way to the ford." They rode along for about a hundred yards to a point where the bank was interrupted by a shelving incline. One could scarcely see the other side. Every now and then the mist parted a little, and the rain was less violent, and then, with some trouble, a steep black bank could be made out.

"Now," said Jack, "I will go first; you follow me. All you have to do is to keep well to the right. Don't attempt to go straight across, it's deep water, and you could not get out. Keep to the right, up stream; you will be in shallow water then all

the way, and it's quite easy. Don't hold your horse too tight. In we go!"

So saying, Jack gave old Gander his head, and was into the water directly. The Count lost sight of him in a moment; the mist coming on thicker than ever. But he heard Gander's feet splashing the water, and Jack's voice encouraging the old horse. Then for a minute there was silence, and then a sound as if of a scramble. Then came a cheery voice out of the darkness. "All right, old man, come on. It's rather deep, tuck your legs up; let the horse go."

Old Gander having shaken himself well, Jack rode down again to the very brink of the water to call out to his friend and guide him. He heard him enter the river from the opposite side; he heard the splashing of the horse's feet. Then he saw a form indistinctly looming through the mist, but it was not in the right track; it was far too much down stream. Surely it could be the Count? "To the right, for God's sake," called out Jack. There was a plunge and a loud splash, and then the driving mist concealed every thing for a moment. Then through the pouring rain and the rush of water came a loud cry—a cry as if for help. And the rain cloud blew over suddenly, and Jack could see right across the stream. But there was nothing but black water, rushing, swishing, hurtling along. No sign of man or horse.

VII.

Jack Marden rode back alone into the yard of the "Crown." In ten minutes the whole place was in commotion, and men turned out with lanterns on foot and on horseback to search the banks of the Ooze, which were scarcely more than a mile off. As the head of the first searching party debouched into the street the clatter of a horse's hoofs were heard on the stones, approaching at a gallop. There was a gleam of hope in Jack's bosom as he called out "There he comes," and rushed forward to meet him. Alas! it was a riderless horse, and as an ostler stopped

"'Tis rather deep, tuck your legs up."

him he was at once recognised as the Count's. "Don't take him to the 'Lion,'" cried Jack, "the servants will rush up and frighten the Countess to death. Bring him into my stable."

The horse was led into the gas-light and examined. One stirrup was hanging loose; the other, with the leather, had been wrenched out of the saddle, evidently by the rider falling. Thick mud covered the animal all up one side, showing that he had rolled over, while even his head was streaming with moisture. The condition of the horse only increased the anxiety of all to find his owner, and Jack having given strict orders that the Countess was not to be alarmed, they sallied forth. But his precautions were useless, as everybody would have surmised who knows the singular pleasure British servants take in spreading bad news. Almost before the party had reached the dark river, the Countess had heard of what had happened, and very soon Jack observed a woman—no other than herself—wandering about with the searchers. He shrunk from meeting her, and went round by the bridge to the opposite side. For several hours they continued the weary task, hoping against hope that the Count might have walked home meanwhile, constantly sending back to inquire, and as frequently mistaking one of their own number for the missing man. At last, thoroughly wearied out, the volunteers dropped away by twos and threes, leaving the local police (who had, of course, appeared on the scene last of all) to continue the investigation. Jack trudged back to the "Crown" about four in the morning, completely exhausted in body and mind; but he did not go until he had seen the Countess silently get into the carriage which had brought her. In the chill dawn of the winter's morning he dropped into an uneasy slumber, to be roused at about eight o'clock by Miles, who awoke him with the words, "They have found him, sir."

"Is he alive?" gasped Jack.

"Lord bless you, sir, no: he's as dead as a red herring." And then Miles proceeded to give a ghastly description of the condition in which the poor Count was found. The stream had, it appeared, swept him a long way down the river, and then,

getting entangled in some weeds, his body had remained concealed just under the bank, at a place which the searchers must have passed at least a dozen times in the dark. He was seen the moment the sun shed his light over the landscape.

There was, of course, no hunting that day from the "Crown" and the "Lion." The men in the hunt-room spoke almost in whispers, and only the servants' hall and kitchen were lively with the excitement of the event. Jack would fain have remained in his chamber, but he had been more intimate than the others with the poor Count, and forced himself to go to the mortuary and see the principal doctor of Market Welton.

"There will be an inquest, of course," said the doctor, who was also the coroner of the district. "I have sent orders to summon a jury. May I take it that you will attend?"

"Certainly," said Jack, "why not?"

"Oh, nothing," replied Dr. Wells, "only if you say you will be there, I need not have you fetched."

"Why of course I shall come," said Jack again.

"Very well," answered the doctor drily, "I will take your word for it. Three o'clock, please."

There was nothing to do till then. Had it not been for the scene at Morley's, Jack would have hastened to inquire what he could do for the widow. But he felt that, under the circumstances, he had better not go. Yet he could not help sending a note by Miles to ask whether he could be of any use. His man returned in ten minutes. "Her Ladyship's compliments, and Lord Reginald is attending to her wishes." So Jack, who was too excited to take the rest he so much needed, went out into the town, and walked in an aimless manner down the High Street.

VIII.

Knots of people were standing before the doors of shops and publichouses discussing the sad occurrence. Was it fancy, or was it true that some of them looked at Jack in a curious way, and that the salute of even the local tradesmen was less effusive than usual? And what a singular thing it was that that man in the thick overcoat and tall hat seemed to be following him wherever he went to! Did he hear correctly when he fancied a small boy said, "There's 'im as did it"? Surely all these matters were the outcome of anxiety and a sleepless night!

Soon afterwards he walked to the town hall, and found a dense crowd surrounding it and filling up all the passages, the room itself where the inquest was held being kept comparatively clear by the police. Way was made for him readily enough, and as he entered he noticed that his friends of the Crown, Captain Scarlett, Pemberton, and the rest of them, had arrived before him. That they just looked at him with scarcely a sign of recognition did not, at the moment, strike him as singular—his thoughts were dwelling on those strange visions which had already disturbed him. The jury came in, having just returned from viewing the body. The first deponents were those who had found the dead Count, and Dr. Aspinwall, of Burrwood, who had joined in the search, and had in vain attempted to restore animation. Their evidence was short, but to the point: they had found the body in the place described, and there was no doubt that life had been destroyed by drowning some hours before.

Jack was next called. He told the sad story, in reply to the questions addressed to him, much as it has been told here. He was about to retire, when a sharp-looking man with a clean-shaven face and a long nose walked into the room, and, throwing off his travelling coat, asked leave to put some questions to the witness. He appeared, said he, on behalf of the Austro-Hungarian Em-

bassy, the deceased being a Hungarian. He produced his credentials, and apologised to the coroner for his late arrival. He had been telegraphed for by the widow, and had only just reached Market Welton. Of course the new-comer was given full liberty to proceed; and he inquired of Jack how it was that they had selected that dangerous ford, instead of returning by the road?

"It was much shorter," replied Marden.

"Who suggested this short cut?"

"I did," was the answer, after a little hesitation.

"Yet you were warned against it?"

"I was."

"I have nothing more to ask for the present," said the long-nosed man, sitting down; "but I may have to bring a request before the jury later on. Meanwhile, perhaps, Mr. Coroner, you will inform the witness that he may have to be recalled at a further stage of the inquiry."

"Please do not leave the neighbourhood of the Court, Mr. Marden. For the present you may stand down," said the Coroner.

Sir John Clowse was the next witness. He deposed that Count Proszeny and Mr. Marden had ridden away from his house about twenty minutes past eleven on the previous night, and that he had not seen deceased after the latter had left his door.

"Were you aware of the route they intended to go by, Sir John?" inquired the long-nosed man.

"I was," replied Sir John.

"Did you think it safe to attempt the ford?"

"I did not," answered Sir John again, evidently afraid of the next question. But it was inevitable.

"And did you not warn them against it?"

"I did my best to dissuade them."

"Who did you speak to on the subject?"

"Both," replied the baronet; "but they persevered in their intention."

"Please tell us exactly what passed," added the Coroner.

Thus pressed, Sir John Clowse had to admit that his remonstrances were principally addressed to Mr. Marden, who knew the country, but that he was obstinate.

One of the farmers who had been present gave evidence to the same effect, and on being asked whether he himself, knowing the place well, would have attempted to cross it on such a night, replied that he considered the attempt excessively foolhardy.

There appeared to be no more evidence forthcoming, nor even necessary, and the jury were about to retire, when the gentleman from the Austro-Hungarian Embassy stated that the Countess, whom he also had the honour to represent, would probably desire to be heard; but that having only that morning arrived from London, he had not been able to consult his noble client and therefore begged that the inquest might be adjourned to the next morning. Meanwhile, he hoped that a burial-order would be given, as of course there was no doubt of the cause of death.

The Court was then cleared, the coroner requesting Sir John Clowse to remain, thinking that as a county magistrate of experience his presence might be useful. On re-assembling, the Coroner stated that the inquest would be adjourned to the next morning, and that the attendance of several witnesses, including Colonel Scarlett, Lord Reginald Bletchley, and Mr. Marden would be required.

Jack staggered off as in a dream. What was the gist of those questions, of the queer looks, and of the remarks he had heard? He did not dare to think; yet he thought nevertheless. As he walked down the street, somebody took hold of his arm. "Never mind, old fellow; you'll be all right. I'll stand by you," said a friendly voice. It was Pemberton, whom he had scarcely noticed in the town hall.

"What do you mean? What will be all right? Why should not everyone stand by me?" asked Jack, bewildered.

"What! do you mean to say you don't understand?" inquired Pemberton in surprise.

"Indeed I don't," answered Jack.

"Why, old man, they think that you were blackguard enough

to drown the Count because you were spoons on his wife," replied his friend.

"My God!" was all poor Jack could say.

And ten minutes afterwards, as he was sitting in his room, still in a state of stupor, while the attentive Miles was urging him to take something, there was a knock at the door.

"I have a warrant for your apprehension, sir," said a policeman, walking in. "It is all in order, signed by Sir John Clowse. Will you get ready and come with me? or would you prefer stopping here? You can do so if you please, as there is no charge at present, beyond being a suspected person. I will leave one of my men in the passage, and you can have all your comforts."

IX.

How Jack passed the night he was never able to tell. Pemberton could scarcely obtain the address of his solicitor from him, so terribly was he upset by the sudden blow which had fallen upon him! To be suspected of a foul and premeditated murder because he had fallen in love with a beautiful woman! To be suspected by her whom he loved above everything on earth! It was too horrible—it was impossible. The coroner, the jury, and even the long-nosed man must see how impossible it was. Yet in that long night, as he examined his conscience, he recollected that even during his weary search on the dark bank of the Ooze the thought had more than once flashed across him, "Now she is free! Now it is no longer wrong to love her, and now she may be persuaded to love me in return." Before morning at last came with slow steps, he had almost persuaded himself that he was really guilty, and fancied that, possibly, he might in his excitement and drunkenness have pushed the Count off his horse into the deep black waters. He was disposed to confess everything, and to plead guilty of murder before he was even charged with it. But with the morning came Mr. Baker,

his solicitor, fussy, anxious, and alert, though he had travelled by the night-mail. Little indeed could he extract from poor Jack, and after he had spoken to Pemberton his countenance fell.

"I am afraid he did it," said the man of the law, privately; "I am very much afraid he did. I have known many gentlemen commit the most incredible crimes under the influence of love and wine. It looks very black for him. Never mind, we must do our best."

No one would have recognised in the haggard, bewildered-looking man who appeared in the Town Hall on that Wednesday morning the spruce, healthy Jack Marden, who only a few days ago had led all the field from Lappington Gorse to the Willows, at the head of the best riders in England. Two nights of sleepless anxiety, one day of harrowing suspense without food, had completely changed him.

The first witness called was Countess Proszeny, who appeared in deep black, her face thickly veiled. She was accommodated with a chair, and threw her fall back to give her evidence. She looked pale as a corpse, but was quiet and collected. After a few preliminary and unimportant questions, the long-nosed man asked her:

"Was your husband great friends with Mr. Marden?"

"I believe so," was the answer. "He liked Mr. Marden very much."

"Was not Mr. Marden an admirer of yours?"

"He said so," she replied.

"When?"

"When we returned from the play in London."

"What did he say to you?"

"He asked me to elope with him," answered the Countess, without any hesitation.

"On what day was that?" enquired the Coroner.

"On Friday evening last."

"Have you seen him since?" continued the long-nosed man.

"Not until now," replied the Countess.

"And the deceased, did he meet him before the dinner at Sir John's?"

"I believe not," was the reply; "in fact I am sure he did not, as my poor husband and I were together until he went to fetch Mr. Marden on Monday evening."

"Then Mr. Marden did not travel down in the same train with you?"

"No."

"Did he go to town with you?"

"Yes, with me and my husband."

"Of course I mean with you and your husband. Now tell me, was there any cause of quarrel between the deceased and Mr. Marden?"

"None that I know of."

"Only that you know Mr. Marden admired you, and wanted you to leave your husband for him?"

"That is all."

"Thank you, Countess. I am sorry to have troubled you. That will do."

Marden's solicitor jumped up to cross-examine the Countess, but his client stopped him.

"You are not to worry her with a single question," whispered he.

"But I must," urged the solicitor. "Why, she has made the noose for you."

"No," said Jack, "I have made the noose for myself. Every word she says is true. I will not have her cross-examined."

"I must do my duty," replied his adviser.

"If you say a word, I shall stand up in open court and declare I did it," answered Marden.

The lawyer was fain to sit down.

The Countess having retired, Lord Reginald was called, and asked whether he had noticed Mr. Marden's attentions to the Countess. Of course he had, and on further questions being put, admitted that he had seen Marden in the box at the "Vaudeville" with her, and that Jack had appeared annoyed when he and his friends came in between the acts.

Colonel Scarlett and Mr. Blanshard gave similar evidence, and Sir John Clowse, being recalled, testified to Marden's attentions to the Countess in the hunting-field.

The jury retired at about twelve o'clock, and in ten minutes returned with a verdict of "WILFUL MURDER" against John Marden.

X.

PEMBERTON was the only one of his Market Welton friends who stuck to him and believed in him. Jack's love for the beautiful Countess had so changed his habits and so estranged him from his former companions that though they hesitated to think him guilty they by no means stood up for his innocence. They agreed that he had become moody, silent, and reserved; that his fatal passion had completely altered him, and that he might under its influence have committed an act which at any other time he would have viewed with extreme abhorrence. Lord Reginald left Market Welton and spent his time assisting the Countess and consulting with her solicitor. Yet he by no means shared the hostile opinions of his hunting friends, and was loyal enough to waste a good deal of time in vain attempts to convince the widow of Jack Marden's innocence. These endeavours, as well as his friendly assistance, he continued until the trial. The evidence before the magistrates was a recapitulation of that given at the inquest, and Jack was fully committed for trial, being lodged meanwhile in Kilsby gaol. For many days he was in so depressed and exhausted a condition that he declared he would plead guilty and be hung outright, rather than fight the weary battle of life under such circumstances. But fortunately some time had to elapse before the spring assizes, the love of life and liberty gradually revived, and he consented to think of his defence. Meanwhile his friends had not been idle. Pemberton and his solicitor had at once communicated with Mr. Marden, senior, and no expense was

spared to secure the best counsel, and to obtain evidence in his favour. Jack so steadily refused to attack the Countess, whom his legal advisers wished to prove a heartless coquette, that they had, most unwillingly, to abandon this line of defence. When the day of trial came, the Attorney-General prosecuted, the renowned Serjeant Wallington appearing for the prisoner. He was instructed by the long-nosed man from the Austro-Hungarian Embassy, while Mr. Baker of course took his place next to the learned Serjeant.

The first portion of the evidence was very nearly the same as that already related. No new facts were elicited in the examination by the Attorney-General, and in cross-examination, Serjeant Wallington's endeavours appeared to be confined to proving that the ford was not as dangerous as it had been made out to be. He even persuaded Sir John Clowse to admit that he himself had crossed it once, on a dark stormy night, though the worthy baronet protested that this occurred many years before.

But when the Countess appeared in the witness box, and had been examined-in-chief, Mr. Serjeant Wallington rose and put the following questions :—

"Was your late husband in good health at the time immediately preceding the fatal accident?"

"No," said the Countess, "he was not always well."

"What was the matter with him?"

"We never quite knew. I feared it was heart disease."

"Indeed; and your husband hunted?"

"Yes, he hunted; he was passionately fond of it."

"Was he what is termed a hard rider?" continued the Serjeant.

"He used to be, before these last two seasons, but he did not ride very hard latterly."

"Why not?"

"Because it did not quite agree with him."

"What happened when he rode hard?"

"He used to get fainting fits."

"Oh! and when did they come on, please?"

"At various times."

"Please specify one particular time."

After some hesitation, the Countess said she could not remember.

"Try," insisted the Serjeant.

"I remember now," answered the witness at last, "he fainted near Lewes, after taking a big jump with the Southdown fox-hounds."

"When was that?"

"Last November."

"And after that he left off jumping?"

"Well, not entirely; but the doctor told him not to leap at all."

"Thank you. Did he bathe—I mean in the sea or river?"

"Not latterly."

"Why? did he not like it?"

"Yes, very much; but the doctors prohibited it."

"Did they tell you their reason?"

"They said that cold water might produce a sudden shock, and stop the action of the heart."

"That will do, thank you, my Lady," said the learned Serjeant politely; and the Attorney-General having nothing more to ask, the Countess withdrew.

The other witnesses, when their examination-in-chief was over, were cross-examined on the same subject. They testified that the Count had incidentally mentioned that he was in bad health and could not ride as he formerly did; but of course they could give no evidence as to the nature of his complaint.

The Attorney-General having concluded his case, and proved to his own satisfaction that the prisoner was a vile seducer and murderer, having compared him to David, and the Countess to a modern and virtuous Bathsheba, and thanked Providence piously that the law of England was better administered than that of Jerusalem, Mr. Serjeant Wallington opened the case for the defence.

He said that he would show that the deceased was subject to

fainting fits, having long suffered from disease of the heart; that any sudden shock like a jump, or, still more, sudden immersion in cold water, was likely to produce such a fit, and that therefore the real solution of the mystery was, that he had already seriously disturbed the action of the heart by jumping over the gate. This leap was proved to have been taken not only by the evidence of the prisoner at the inquest, but by the fact that that gate had been found securely locked immediately after the occurrence, and had been proved to have been locked by the farmer. The marks of horses' hoofs also showed distinctly that both had jumped the gate. Then this action was suddenly suspended by his sudden immersion in the Ooze. The unfortunate man had fallen off his horse, just having time to utter one shriek before fainting. His client, continued the learned Serjeant, had been somewhat thoughtless in suggesting this route, which, however, possessed no danger for a man who knew the country and was in good health. The prisoner was not aware that the Count suffered from heart-disease, or he would have been the last to recommend it. But recklessness, both in making love to a married woman and in plunging into a cold river in December, was the worst crime that could possibly be imputed to him.

A Hungarian Baron was first called, and produced some sensation in Court by his magnificent fur cloak and gorgeous spurs. This nobleman testified to the late Count's great abilities as a cross-country rider, and to the sudden fainting fits which had, on more than one occasion, followed on his most brilliant displays. He had been an intimate friend of Count Proszeny and was able to make these assertions from personal observation. A Szekler groom, who had served with the Count seven years, gave similar evidence, both being cross-examined with very little effect.

Serjeant Wallington then called a succession of doctors: one from Kolosŵar, one from Pesth, two from London, and one from Kilsby itself. The last-mentioned had driven over to Market Welton to see the Count the very day of the journey to London.

They agreed in declaring that jumping was highly dangerous

to a person in the Count's condition, and that a sudden immersion in water scarcely above freezing point would be almost certain to produce a fainting fit, if it were not immediately fatal. In cross-examination, the German doctor admitted that the Count's health might have improved since he last saw him, but maintained his opinions as to the danger of sudden shocks of every description. This view was shared by his colleagues.

Then some young farmers were called, who showed that they had crossed the ford dozens of times, in all states of the weather, both at night and in the day, and that there was no danger whatever for a man who knew the place and had the full use of his limbs.

Finally, a few witnesses were called to character and to prove that Jack Marden had always been on excellent terms with the Count, and though in love with the wife had always spoken in the most friendly manner of the husband. When the Attorney-General rose to address the jury, he did not appear quite so sure of his case, and not even his long practice sufficed to give his assertions that air of truth he was so anxious to impart. Even his most emphatic periods and the most fiery bursts of his eloquence failed to remove a certain expression of doubt from the faces of the jury, and when Serjeant Wallington followed, they appeared not unwilling to accept his explanations.

There was scarcely any delay after the summing up of the Judge, which may be summarised in a few words, for he simply reviewed the evidence which, as he pointed out, was wholly circumstantial. He weighed the arguments on both sides against each other, and was careful to call their attention to the medical evidence, which had not been shaken in cross-examination, and which proved conclusively that the Count was in bad health. He told them that unless they were perfectly convinced that the prisoner had committed this most heinous crime, they must give him the benefit of the doubt. They did so, and returned a verdict of Not Guilty without retiring.

When he heard the verdict poor Jack fainted; the strong man had become as weak as a child; the bold rider was as nervous

as the most timid woman; one of the best men in the most fashionable hunt in England had only just escaped the felon's doom.

Serjeant Wallington shook hands with him warmly; he could not return his able counsel's manly grasp.

"Tell her that I did not do it," he whispered hoarsely.

"Tell who?" enquired his solicitor.

But Pemberton, who had supported him throughout, understood him at once. Lord Reginald had been seen escorting the widow to her carriage, and Pemberton rushed after him. An eager discussion went on between the two outside the court-house, after the Countess had driven off, and when the late prisoner came out, Mr. Baker was called to assist them.

"Will you tell Lord Reginald Bletchley what your instructions were?" said Pemberton.

"Certainly, if you wish, now the case is over," replied the solicitor. "My client absolutely prohibited me from asking the Countess any questions at all at the inquest, and he threatened to plead guilty unless the learned Serjeant promised to abstain absolutely from any cross-examination likely to annoy her. His first thought throughout has been for her: he told me over and over again that he did not care about his own fate, but would not allow the lady's character to be attacked in any way whatever."

"You hear?" asked Pemberton.

Lord Reginald was chewing his moustache uneasily. "I should be the last man to think evil of an old friend," he said at last, "and I never believed he did it. But the Countess has made up her mind that if he is not legally guilty, he is morally her husband's murderer."

"Unless she forgives him," urged Pemberton, "I believe that the poor fellow will go mad."

"I will try my best," continued Lord Reginald, "and," he added, smiling half sadly, "I shan't be hurting my chance with the widow, because I know I have got none. Still I doubt whether she will listen to any arguments."

Then all three adjourned to the hotel where the Countess was staying, and there were messages and conferences without end. In the evening Pemberton came into Jack's room. He was lying on a sofa, pretending to smoke and read the paper. But the newspaper was upside down, and his cigar was out. On the other side of the fire sat Mr. Marden, senior, his face the picture of distress.

"Jack has not spoken a word since we left the court, Mr. Pemberton," said the old gentleman, "and has not eaten a morsel of dinner. I shall have to send for a doctor if this goes on. I wish you would speak to him."

Jack only smiled faintly.

"Cheer up, old man," said Pemberton, slapping him on the shoulder. And then he stooped down and whispered to him.

Marden shook his head. "You are only saying that to comfort me," he remarked.

"Upon my honour it is true. Here is Baker, he will confirm it. Come in, Baker!" cried he, as that individual gently opened the door and peeped in. "Your client won't believe that the fair Countess has forgiven him."

"Freely and entirely!" assured the solicitor. "She is now convinced that the catastrophe was entirely due to her husband's complaint, which must have ended fatally in the shortest possible time."

But even this evidence was not sufficient to rouse Jack Marden from his apathy. He felt sure that his good friends had improved on the Countess's admissions, and indeed he was right, for the widow, though willing to admit that Jack was innocent of murder, still considered him guilty of manslaughter. So, though he was congratulated and made much of, all his friends' endeavours failed to restore the old geniality and his pristine health. After some months, on the persuasion of Mr. Marden, senior, he started with Pemberton for a tour round the world.

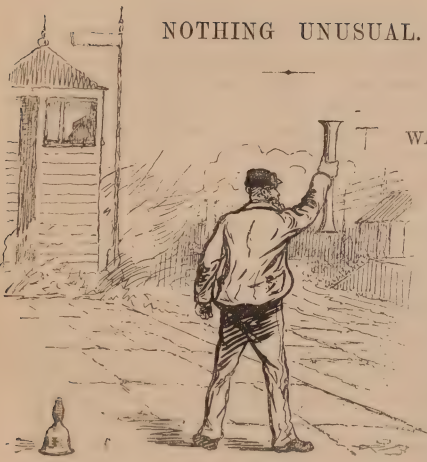
Pemberton returned in a couple of years. Not so Jack, who has chosen a new home at the Antipodes, where he has become the terror of bushrangers and all evil-doers, as the chief of the

local mounted police. He lives in a beautiful house on the slope of a wooded hill overhanging a deep-blue river. In the verandah a handsome dark lady may often be seen playing with two pretty children, or busy with her needle and her household work.

The neighbours say that she was once a foreign countess, but they appear to be wrong, as she calls herself plain Mrs. Jack Marden.

Lord Reginald Bletchley, after flirting with twenty different ladies for a couple of seasons, was suddenly captured by a wealthy but not very beautiful spinster of comparatively mature years. A heavy "cropper" over Bend Or (when for the first time in his life, his lordship "fielded") settled the matter, and the two are now comfortably established in the North of England, where Lady Reginald distributes tracts and soup, while her husband does not dare to look into the face of any woman between sixteen and sixty.

NOTHING UNUSUAL.



IT WAS a mild, calm November morning. The sun was doing its best to struggle through the fog which at the best of times envelops London at this season of the year, when two horsemen might have been perceived—I beg pardon, when two gentlemen might have been perceived—walking up and down impatiently before the booking-office of the Great South and Northern Junction Railway.

They were Mr. Seville Park and Mr. Meadows, who had been asked to join a shooting party at Chippington, thirty miles off, where wild pheasants were supposed to be plentiful and rabbits abundant. Mr. Seville Park was enthusiastic. Clad in a suit of appropriate dittoes, and supplied with all the paraphernalia of drinking-cup, corkscrew, cartridge-bag, and sandwich-case, he evidently meant to do some execution and not to starve by the way. Mr. Meadows had been less careful of the inner man, but no less prudent as regards ammunition.

"How many cartridges have you brought?" he asked.

"A hundred and fifty," replied Mr. Park. "And you?"

"Oh, a hundred. I should think that would do."

"I don't know," answered Park, reflectingly. "I understand there are lots of pheasants down there. Oh, here's 'Wanderer' and 'The Man about Town,'" he continued, to the neglect of grammar, as the former gentleman, armed with a double eye-glass and a heavy portmanteau, and the latter, followed by a servant carrying an arsenal of every description of small arm, uncurled themselves from a four-wheeler.

Seville Park rushed forward. "Shall we be in time for the train?" he exclaimed.

"Wanderer" looked up at the clock. "Why, it does not start till 8.50, and it is only 8.40. If you've got your ticket you've only to walk down the platform, and there you are!"

"I don't mean this train," said his questioner, "but the one we are to come back by. I am bound to be in town by 7, for I expect some people to dinner. Are we sure to be back?"

"Certainly," replied 'Wanderer,' "unless you choose to shoot in the dark. Our train is due here at 6.15, so you'll have lots of time."

"But," persisted Mr. Park, "are you *sure* that we shall catch it? And are you *quite* certain that it is due here at 6.15?"

So "Wanderer" (the "teller") rubbed the anxious man's nose against the time-table, and judiciously guided that feature until Chippington was discovered. Somewhat quieted, Mr. Park allowed himself to be conducted to a smoking-carriage, when the party was soon further augmented by Mr. Fitzacre and Mr. Myburd, the former a quiet, unobtrusive sportsman, the latter thus called from a speciality which will appear hereafter. But as when the colt by Parmesan out of Zephyr won the Derby, the sporting papers next morning printed the winner as Favonius, though the name was only conferred on him after the race, so I call Mr. X. Myburd, although he only obtained this pseudonym by mutual consent in the course of the day.

Chippington was reached after the delay inseparable from a "stopping" train. Here the first difficulty was, how to cram

six men with their guns and bags, and one servant, into a waggonette only built for four. The difficulty was solved by five squeezing in, and then resolutely refusing to admit the sixth. This happened to be "The Man about Town." We all agreed that he carried too much flesh, and that it would do him a world of good to run alongside the carriage. It was strange how very unanimous we were on this subject. "The Man about Town," being in a minority of one, had to give in, and hang on as best he could, half running all the time. Perhaps there was in our minds some faint hope that the strain on his arms might interfere with his shooting, and thus prevent that veteran "Shekarry" from "wiping our eyes." Perhaps there was really some benevolent hope that he might by the exertion reduce the exuberant proportions of his waist. Anyhow, he had to run or to hold on behind, like the Arab of the metropolis, a task which was not facilitated by the facetious banter of the rustics and the forgetfulness of the driver, who every now and then instinctively obeyed the repeated calls to "whip behind." Fortunately the drive through the Wessex lanes was not a long one, and "The Man about Town" reached the tryst, where an army of beaters was waiting, panting and exhausted, but still living, and much less out of temper than might have been expected. Here, again, the inevitable Seville Park inquired "whether we should catch the train back?" and contested the distance from the station, which "The Man about Town" naturally estimated at seven miles, while the driver called it two. No assurances that we could not possibly see to shoot after four o'clock quieted his fears; and finally, "to be on the safe side," the trap was, in deference to his wishes, ordered an hour sooner than was at all necessary. Barrels, the head keeper, received us with the urbanity and choice of language which are usual to him. "We will, gentlemen, with your permission," he began, "commence by carefully beating this spinney in a lateral direction."

"In a what?" incautiously asked Meadows.

"In a lateral direction, if you please, sir," replied Barrels.

"Crossways I mean, sir," he added condescendingly, seeing that Meadows, though he had taken a first class at Oxford, had not understood him. "Gentlemen, are you all fully supplied with cartridges?" We nodded affirmatively. "Then, if you please, follow me." This we did, in awe-stricken silence. We were soon posted, and as the last man was put up Barrels remarked confidentially, "I shall now proceed to give the signal."

Soon "Mark! mark!" resounded out of the underwood, and the flopping of pheasants was heard, followed by the sharp crack of "The Man about Town's" Purdey. Next to me was X.— the colt, in fact, by Parmesan out of Zephyr. A pheasant rose among the oak trees, at a moderate computation a hundred yards from me and a hundred and fifty from him. Bang! bang! he let fly with both barrels; the bird crossed to the far side, where a crack from Fitzacre brought him down, upon which X. instantly shouted, "My bird;" and turning to me cried, "A splendid shot at that distance, was it not? He was dead before that fellow on the other side fired."

I was too intent on the pheasants to reply, too far from him to argue. In another minute up went a hen close to me. By some extraordinary luck—a piece of good fortune which occurs to me about once in a blue moon—I knocked her over with the first barrel, and was already in the act of re-loading when X. deliberately raised his piece, fired in the direction of the carcase, and then shouted out, "My bird." So "Myburd" he remained for the rest of the day, but I gave him as wide a berth as possible.

"I am at a loss," said Barrels, as we collected at the far end of the wood, "to account for several cock pheasants which, to the best of my belief, roosted in this glade last night. I regret that I fear I misled Mr. Fitzacre by assuring him that these birds were present. I beg to apologise for my error."

Barrels was freely forgiven, and we proceeded to beat out some spinnies, in which there was a still poorer show. This fact was soon accounted for by the beaters shouting "Fox! Fox!" and sure enough a fine old dog poked his sharp snout out of the brambles, eagerly looking out for a chance of escape.

"My full permission, Gentlemen, to shoot that fox."

Now Chippington was not in a hunting country, so Barrels was eager that the thief who had spoiled sport should be slain, and exclaimed loudly, "You have my full permission, gentlemen, to shoot that fox."

But no one availed himself of the permission. Reynard came out, cantered along the ditch in full view of three guns, and disappeared in the neighbouring copse.

"I regret," Barrels afterwards said to me, "that none of the gentlemen would assume the character of a vulpecide." I stared. "That no one would kill the fox," the poor man added, finding himself once more above his audience. "That fox has spoiled the shooting, having evidently scattered the pheasants in these spinnies." So he had. "The Man about Town" and Seville Park were pretty fortunate, and when the latter fired, X. always followed with at least one barrel, and shouted, "My bird!" but the sport on the whole was poor. At last we approached a place where, as Barrels assured us, "he thought we should now reap some recompense." It was a long narrow strip of very close underwood dotted with oak trees, the upper end butting on the turnpike-road, from which it was separated by a high wooden paling. It was to be beaten from below towards the road; two guns were placed on each side, and two of us were on the road itself. As we clambered over the palings (for I was one of the two sent forward), we found the roof of a shed opposite crowded with the brewery hands, who, as it was their dinner hour, had chosen a good vantage ground for seeing the fun. The road was also densely crowded with natives, and by the time the first shots had sounded from below, the local doctor had pulled up his trap to look on, while farmers on their way from market were eagerly standing up in their gigs, regardless of the possibility of their horses being startled by the reports. Under such circumstances, to shoot at all was a matter of difficulty, to shoot well impossible. We heard "Mark! mark!" from below. We heard the rustling of wings, and occasionally saw a pheasant dimly through the brown leaves of the oaks. Several times the cry of "My bird!" resounded in our ears;

but nothing came our way. The rustics, roused to enthusiasm, had climbed the palings, and kept shouting at each other whenever a bird was missed or hit. For some time we saw nothing but peasants instead of pheasants. At last, as the beaters approached us, a bird flew over right towards the shed on which were assembled the vivacious brewers. Four barrels followed him, and a feather or two fell on the spectators. I heard, as we were re-loading, a tremendous succession of shots come from below, amid cries of "Mark! mark!" and a *bouquet* of some thirty or forty birds got up from under the palings, and careering over the heads of the lookers-on turned across the road just above the doctor's grey mare. We were not loaded in time, and had no second guns. The jeers of the populace were painful, and scarcely calculated to soothe our nerves. When a couple more birds got up right under their noses I let fly almost recklessly. I did not kill a bird, but very nearly killed two boys. Crestfallen, we re-entered the spinney, to find that "The Man about Town" had killed eight brace and a half, Fitzacre seven brace, Meadows eleven birds, and Myburd, according to his own account, nineteen brace, being about as much as the other three put together. Neither of us had bagged a single one.

As it was now time for lunch, we were about to settle down under a hedge when Barrels came up, followed by two dependants carrying a gate. "This," he said, "I think, you will find more commodious, gentlemen." And we did. Seville Park, however, constantly consulted his watch, and expressed doubts, it being then two o'clock, whether we could reach the station in time for the five train. He hurried down his sandwiches and declined sherry on the ground that there was "no time to lose." We then proceeded to beat out the ferns and underwood in the "Park," with but moderate success. I was most unfortunate, as whenever a bird came my way it was sure to be so hidden by the leaves as not to give me a fair chance, while I heard a dropping fire and the flop of birds as they fell from the other stations. On the whole I was well pleased, as I have the greatest difficulty in hitting a haystack unless it is quite full

grown, and I enjoyed the fun just as much without shooting myself. I kept supplying my neighbours with cartridges from my belt, as one of the boys carrying the reserve was, of course, invisible when wanted. At last I was stationed at a corner near the end of a net, close to the grammatical and correct Barrels. Two birds got up. I fired, and, of course, missed. Meadows, who was near me, shouted, "Have you any cartridges?" as he dropped a bird. I recklessly threw him a handful. Hardly had I done so when another brace got up. Bang, bang! one was down, but my last cartridge was gone. Up went several close to me. In my hurry and excitement I pulled both triggers, forgetting that my gun was empty. Whirr! whirr! again. More birds, which I could almost have knocked down with a stick.

"Mark, sir, mark!" cried Barrels; "why don't you shoot?" almost excited out of his politeness. "Mark again!" as another fine cock flew over my head. I raised my gun involuntarily, only to drop the useless weapon. At last it was over. Some dozen or fifteen had passed within twenty yards of me. The obsequious Barrels inquired, "If you please, sir, you missed some splendid shots. Why did you not fire?"

"Because I had no cartridges, Barrels," I replied.

"A most excellent reason, sir," he answered, "but one much to be regretted. Had I divined that you were short of ammunition I would myself have carried your reserve. Thus this untoward accident would not have happened." This beautiful speech almost consoled me for my ill fortune, the more so as the others had done fairly well, Myburd, of course, having killed any number. But Seville Park had disappeared; no one had seen him. It was now dark, and time to collect and drive off, but our friend was not to be found. We feared that in the last *mêlée* under the shade of the oaks he might have been shot, and the notion of our poor friend having dropped silently among the deep ferns, perhaps levelled by one of Myburd's shots at a dead 'un, was too horrible to contemplate. We sent the beaters down to look for his corpse, but they did not find it. At last, with heavy hearts, we turned to the waggonette. There was room for "The

Man about Town" now, since poor Park was missing. But even in this moment of supreme anxiety neither Barrels' style nor his politeness forsook him. "Allow me," he said, as we were stowing our guns away, "to cleanse the barrels of your guns. The perspiration on them is not unlikely to injure the weapons." And he carefully wiped each down before closing the case. We drove off, anxious and disturbed. What *could* have become of Park? He was last seen just before that successful beat, when Wanderer's ammunition fell short, and saved his reputation as a shot.

"I believe some one has put a charge into him," said Meadows.

"I wonder whether he's in the bracken?" remarked "The Man about Town;" "those beaters might have missed him."

"Had he any family?" asked Fitzacre. "It will be painful to break it to them."

Then we relapsed into sad silence till we turned into the station-yard. As we drove up who should we see but the lamented Seville Park, calmly smoking his pipe under the lamp. We all felt a sudden revulsion; we considered ourselves excessively ill-used. The man whose corpse we had been anxiously looking for had simply sneaked off while everyone was busy with the birds, in order *to catch his train*. And while our brains had been racked with the tortures of harrowing anxiety on his account, he had been comfortably smoking at the station door. After an unanimous hoot our language was scarcely Parliamentary. Seville Park had what is termed rather a "rough" time of it for the first quarter of an hour. We then counted up what each had shot. The total was 61½ brace. These, we found, were made up as follows:—

"The Man about Town"	22½	Seville Park	9½
Fitzacre	14	"Wanderer"	3
Meadows	12½	Myburd	27

It is true that this makes 88½ brace, but everyone had given in his list accurately, and there was no reason to doubt anyone's word, so we concluded that the odd 27 brace had been lost.

LITTLE ALICE.

A TALE OF MY YOUTH.

HERE is a period in most men's lives when they fancy that they are judges of horse-flesh, and understand women. Of course there be some wise young men and some studious, who never fancy themselves at all, who are always modest and unassuming, who have a proper respect for their elders, and look upon flirtation, except as a step on the road to matrimony, with mixed feelings of horror and shyness. But such youths are the exception: the majority—particularly those who have been left to their own devices early—worship at more than one shrine of beauty before their intentions are serious, and are thoroughly convinced of their extreme acuteness about horses before a succession of deceptions opens their eyes to the moderate extent of their knowledge.

I was not one of the exceptions; on the contrary, I was a flagrant example of the rule. I fancied myself very considerably. Having knocked about London for a year or two, and tried my youthful wings at a few fashionable dances, I thought myself almost irresistible with the fair sex. And having gone down to Ascot and Goodwood pretty regularly, and studied Ruff's Guide by way of light reading in my leisure moments, I imagined I knew all about racing. Add to this that I had ridden to hounds on a hired screw a couple of times with the Southdown, and had torn after various packs of harriers on a rough Shetland pony in days when I was small and light enough to ride such an animal, and the sum of my sporting experience is pretty well before the reader. Two circumstances, unfortunately, made me particularly conceited. The one was, that on my second visit to Ascot (a Tuesday), I "spotted" a horse at 22 to 1 as not unlikely to win the stakes, judging only by his public form as told in the pages of the Calendar. I backed him for the huge sum of ten shillings —about all I could spare—and the brute won pretty easily. I never got over this success. Not only did I believe myself to be an infallible prophet, but I told the story so often, that my friends began to believe in me as well. No failures, after that day, shook my confidence in myself. If my horse was struck out, I put it down as a case of "kidding;" if he was beaten long before the distance post was reached, I boldly asserted that the jockey never tried. In fact, there was always an excuse handy. The other circumstance I have alluded to was a ten-shilling bet I won from a well-known and highly respected owner of race-horses, now, alas! in his grave. This gentleman was good enough to give me a lift from Chichester to Goodwood one Cup day, and on the way the conversation turned on past winners of various races on the ducal course.

"Crater won the Stewards' Cup," he said, "in such and such a year."

Now I had been studying "Ruff" on my way down, and had no hesitation in contradicting him flatly. "It was Croagh-Patrick," I said.

He scarcely paid attention, so absurd did it appear to him that an unfledged youngster should dispute his authority. I offered, however, to back my opinion.

"I don't mind betting you half-a-sovereign," he said chaffingly, "just to teach you to hold your tongue."

"Done!" I exclaimed, but had discretion enough left not to betray the fact that the last Calendar was concealed in my overcoat. When we reached the park he borrowed one, and shortly afterwards came up to me, balancing a small gold coin on his middle finger.

"Here you are, my boy," he said. "I really did not think you knew anything about it. What do you fancy in this race?"

"Léonie," I replied, unhesitatingly.

"Well, perhaps you're right. I will put you a fiver on Léonie if you like."

I was delighted, for I had not a quarter of the amount by me, and justified myself for running a risk I could not afford by the conviction that if I lost, the good-natured turf magnate would never ask me for the money. Léonie, however, won in a canter, and I returned to town with my pocket full of sovereigns, and the highest opinion of my own acuteness. I shook hands with myself, nay, I hugged myself all the way, and walked about for many months with an air of conscious superiority, which must have been excessively amusing to my friends.

Of the incidents which gave me an equally high estimate of my powers over the fair sex, and of my knowledge of their characters, I will not here speak, as they have nothing to do with my story. It is only when we grow older that we begin to doubt whether we are really so fascinating as we thought, and to suspect that any hanger-on of Tattersall's yard knows more of horses than we do. However, what I have related will show that no such doubts troubled me after my two or three London seasons. I considered myself "good all round." With these qualifications I went down to Yorkshire, the country of jolly girls and hard riders. Scarcely had I settled down in my new quarters —a large town in the East Riding—when I allowed it to become

generally known that I was a "sporting man." Now the sharp Yorkshiremen like a real sporting man, and take to him thoroughly, but they soon find out a false one. I had no older and wiser friend at hand to warn me of the traps which might be set for my unwary youth, and if I had had such a one, I should probably not have listened to him. It soon became known that I wanted to buy a couple of hunters. As it was also understood that I had the wherewithal to pay for them, suggestions of likely horses came in abundance. "You should try The Doctor," said one man at the Club; "I am sure Harrison would sell him." "Triumph is just the horse for you," another would tell me at the bar of the chief hotel; "he would carry you like a bird. You can get him for a mere song—eighty or ninety pounds."

After a time, one name was constantly repeated to me. "Little Alice, sir, that's the mare to suit you. You don't want to spend much money, and you want to *go*. She's the animal for you." This was the refrain of all the songs I heard. Little Alice was in everyone's mouth, and Little Alice's praises on everyone's lips. Meanwhile, however, I had, by some fortunate fluke, really picked up a thoroughly good horse—dear old Griselda—whose picture still hangs opposite to me as I write. Of her I hope some day to be able to tell: for the present, I have space only to say that she carried me well, and was indulgent for my youthful blunders. We often came to grief together, but it was always my own fault; after a time, we were always in at the finish, and that was her merit. But to hark back. I had ridden Griselda a few times to hounds, when the chorus of praise of "Little Alice" suddenly became loud and unanimous. If I was thrown out, a youthful farmer on foot, equally unfortunate, but with a better excuse than myself, would say: "Ah, sir, you should have been on Little Alice. This would not have happened." If my mare refused a big jump because I had not "thrown my heart over," the second whip, rushing up, would exclaim: "What a pity you don't buy Little Alice!" When I was at the bottom of a deep ditch (drains they call them down there), the labourers who helped me out would say to each other: "They tauld me 'twas Little Alice

in t' draaine. I know'd it couldn't be her; *she* never was in t' draaine, she'd joomp anything." And so Little Alice became a perfect nuisance. At last I resolved to look at her, and entered into negotiations with her owner's son, who was second whip of the East Riding hounds. "Well, sir," said he, "she isn't mooch to luik at, Little Alice isn't. But you may try her, and then if you doan't loike her, why loomp her. A shall traaine her for t' Driffield Steeplechaaises."

Nothing could be fairer, I thought. So I made an appointment to ride out to the next convenient meet on Griselda, when the whip promised to bring "Little Alice." The only stipulation he made was, that I should try her with the staghounds, in order that we might be sure of a gallop, and that the mare might not possibly be hacking about all day from cover to cover, without a chance of showing her powers. This appeared to be fair enough also, so I willingly consented. At eleven o'clock on a dull but mild December morning, I at last obtained a view of this wonder of the East Riding. Her appearance was certainly not fascinating. She was a dark grey with black points, standing about fifteen one and a half. She had a ewe-neck, and a decidedly ragged look: but I was too much of a tyro to notice her restless eye, her narrow chest, and her fidgetty quarters. I was, however, decidedly disappointed. "A' tauld yer she wornt mooch to luik at," said the whip; "but you joost get on her." I did—and scarcely had the girths, stirrups, and all other paraphernalia been properly adjusted, when away tore the hounds in full cry. "Little Alice" pulled a bit, and reached her first fence at a pace that astonished me, for I had been used to Griselda's charming manners. Before us was a fine grass field, across which we all galloped at racing speed; there was only a small hedge and ditch on the far side, which every one took flying. I did not quite like my mount's way of "rushing" apparently into fences instead of over them; still she seemed to get over them well enough, notwithstanding. A short plough, another middling jump, and more grass followed, the hounds meanwhile running mutely to a burning scent. "She

can go," I thought to myself as I looked back across, perhaps, the seventh or eighth inclosure; and I saw the field rapidly tailing as the pace told. There was only one man in front of me, the first whip; alongside of me a few hard riders. We came to a big jump, a very big one indeed. There was a gentle slope down to it, so I had plenty of time to look at the place. It was a very wide, ragged ditch, like a disused moat, with a post and rails at the bottom of it, and some thorn bushes clothing its sides. I took a strong pull at "Little Alice," and watched the hard riders. The first whip took it at a fly, the other just scrambled across it somehow. I hesitated. Just as I was going to turn off, up came Mr. Wilson, junior. "Put her at it," he cried—"she'll joomp it well enow. Throw your heart over, mun." I am afraid my heart jumped rather into my mouth than over this beastly place; but hastily reflecting that, if the mare came to grief, it would be no fault of mine, I stuck the spurs into her and went at it. Her pace fairly took my breath away. I hardly knew what happened, but a minute afterwards I found myself over the jump, though very nearly on the mare's head. Across the next field or two we tore as fast as our horses would carry us. The stag had taken the water, and the whips were hurrying to save him from the hounds. I was up with the van, and, as I dismounted from "Little Alice," and loosened the girths, I felt quite convinced that she was indeed a wonder. Men on two-hundred-guinea horses had turned back at that horrible ditch, which, with its thick thorn-bushes and substantial post and rails, I still fancied I saw yawning under me. "What is her price?" I asked when we came up. "Forty pounds." "Come in to-night, and you shall have a cheque," I answered, and the bargain was closed.

For a few days I was in a fool's paradise. I was sure that the mare was very fast, and my success in the betting-ring fired me with the idea of winning a big steeple-chase with "Little Alice." So much enamoured was I with this plan, that I communicated it, privately, to young Wilson, who jumped at it, and suggested a trial of "Alice" on the race-course at Tree-

thorpes, where there was a convenient ring of about a mile and a half round. "We know she'll joomp," he said—"perhaps she can raaice." He promised to find a good trial animal, and after a few days he told me that he had secured a four-year-old by Voltigeur, who had won several handicaps. We started one morning early, and "weighed in" at Wilson's father's farm, where "Little Alice" was still located, the old gentleman getting a handsome sum weekly for "training her." I rode 11 st. 7 lbs., young Wilson 10 st. 7 lbs. "Now," said I, "I will ride 'Little Alice,' and if she can give you 14 lbs. and a beating, she will do." In my preternatural acuteness I forgot that I knew neither whether the horse against which I was going to run was the one he was represented to be, nor whether Wilson would ride fair. We started. I let the light-weight make the running, but kept shouting at him to go on. A quarter of a mile from home I let the mare go, and came in about ten lengths in front. Of course I did not turn round till close to the winning-post, when Wilson appeared to be flogging most unmercifully. Anyhow, I thought I had about two stone in hand, and, if this trial was genuine, no doubt I had. "Now," said Wilson, as we jogged home, "you should enter the mare for the Yarboro steeplechases next week." "No," said I, "she's good enough for Liverpool. I shall hunt her for the present—that will put her in good condition; then I will train her a month before the Grand National." Wilson was staggered at my flying at such high game as this, which clearly did not quite suit his book; but I was firm, and took "Little Alice" into my own stable.

A few days later I jogged her out to the foxhounds. It had been frosty, but the streets were wet, and I thought that it was soft enough to hunt. So did several others, for my friend Mr. Beverley joined me as I passed his farm, and other sportsmen met us at the appointed cross-roads. But we were all disappointed; a messenger arrived to say that the hounds would not come out. It appears that it was harder at the kennels, which were on the wolds, than down in the lowlands where we

had met. We all turned our horses' heads towards home, rather cross. Beverley then suggested that we should come and lunch at his farm, which was a couple of miles on our way, and jog round the place. We agreed, and *en route* the astute farmer soon discovered my magnificent plans with respect to "Little Alice." Having reached his dwelling we found a fine "moock-yard" and a soft paddock, where was a fence with a ditch in front, and long wings, for practising the young hunters. "If Little Alice can do any good at Liverpool," he said, "try her over those hurdles; it will keep her in training." Of course I did not refuse, but to my utter astonishment, the mare did. She would not look at them, though she had jumped a thing three times as formidable only a few days before. I turned her at it again: she laid her ears back, set her forefeet, and began to kick. "Cum, mon," shouted out the delighted spectators, "you would not let t' mare bait you, would you? Sit down on her, mon, and give her t' whip." I did give her both whip and spur with a vengeance; but she only set her forefeet more firmly, and kicked harder. Then she suddenly turned, raced at the jump, and pulled up short just before it, so that I was as nearly as possible pitched on my head. Then the old performance began again, varied with sudden plunges and an occasional rear. I was getting tired, and would have given it up had not my friends continued to chaff unmercifully. Beverley did worse than this, for he kept saying, "Well done, mon, stick to her, give it her, there's na mistaaik, you can stick on." And this encouragement was worse than the jeers, for it made me persevere. He gave me a lead over, but Little Alice kicked harder. The others did likewise, but she kicked still. It appeared to be merely a question of time between me and the mare, as to who should tire first. I was young, strong, and in good condition, and finally, I got the best of it. Little Alice, with her ears still laid back, trembling with excitement, and her flanks heaving, at last took the fence fairly; but she had scarcely landed on the other side when she began plunging again. "Tak' her back," they cried, "braaik her into it, show her you're the master;" and

"Raced at the jump, and pulled up short."

take her back I did, after another five minutes' struggle. But by this time I was fairly done up. I gave her to Beverley's man, and was glad to get into a comfortable arm-chair. Nearly an hour had I been battling with this vicious brute, and though conscious of final triumph, the victory had been dearly won—more dearly than I thought at the time. Even on the way home, Little Alice, who was generally as mild as a lamb on the road, began kicking on no provocation at all. There was a side path which passed between some posts and shortened the route by about a mile. She kept me nearly half an hour at these blessed posts, although there was room enough and to spare to pass between them. I reached home more tired than if I had had a hard day's hunting, and tumbled into bed much puzzled with the mare's conduct. But the next hunting day was worse. The hounds got away straight and fast; Little Alice jumped the first fence, and we landed in a field at the far side of which was a big hedge with a widish ditch in front. It happened, as is so often the case when hounds first get away, that a number of the least bold riders were in front. They all turned off to a gate on the right, while the huntsman and a couple of better men went across the ditch and through the hedge. It was not at all a bad place, the difficulty being more apparent than real. Going at any thing like speed there was no probable chance of anything worse than a scratched face, as there was firm landing on the other side in a grass meadow, which was clearly visible through the thorns of the hedge. But Little Alice, seeing, I suppose, some of them turn off, behaved as badly as possible. She resolutely stopped at the edge of the ditch, and refused to try. As soon as I gave her the spur she began kicking, and after a few struggles kicked herself into the ditch, without getting rid of me. At the bottom of this we fought, the mare playing the same tricks as at Beverley's farm. Soon the last straggler disappeared, and I was left alone to continue the contest. After half an hour of it I had had enough. I got off her back, landing in the field, and as soon as she got rid of me she jumped out. But I could not mount her again. Whenever I tried she spun round like a tee-totum.

I had the pleasure of leading her to Wilson's farm, the nearest place whence I could get a mount home. Wilson overwhelmed me with reproaches. "You have spoilt the mare's temper," said he; "she will never run kindly again. Why did you let Beverley jockey you into trying her over the hurdles in cold blood? *You* knew well enough that she could jump; what was the use of tacking about there and spoiling the mare?"

She was a hopeless case. I did not dare to try her again with hounds. I left her to Wilson to train for the Yarboro' steeplechase, where she ran a bad second, being too small to stay the distance, and having tired herself by "rushing" the first two miles. When I got the bill for keep, training, and sending her to Yarboro', it amounted to twenty-nine pounds, seventeen shillings and sixpence. It did not suit me to pay the amount and keep the mare, so Wilson generously offered to take "Little Alice" in full discharge of all liabilities. I had fortunately not been such a fool as to back her for the race, so on the whole she cost me only about fifty pounds and two days' annoyance and vexation. It was a good lesson, and one which I fully deserved. Wilson, it appears, had long been anxious to get rid of the brute, for she was practically quite useless, and would only go straight if she got her head at once and had a horse in front of her. If stopped or turned, she lost her temper directly. Hence his desire that she should be tried with stag-hounds, and his anxiety that I should go at that big jump on the first day. He knew well enough that if I stopped her when she was in the humour she would never jump again. And the trial was a mere sham. The horse was, indeed, a half-bred by Voltigeur, but had never won a race in his life. So my first Yorkshire season would hardly be called a brilliant success. But I forgave Wilson freely; it served me right for being so bumptious.

HOW I STOLE A HORSE.

URING my stay in Hungary I was largely occupied in buying horses. Sometimes I was eminently successful, and was able to despatch twenty or thirty good ones to Pest, but on one occasion I made a serious mistake. I bought a mare who, on examination by the veterinary before she was put into the train, was found to be in foal. As it was quite useless for the purpose required to send a mare in foal all the way to the capital, this gentleman, who also acted as sub-agent to the company, was directed by its chief to sell the mare in the neighbourhood at the best price he could get. The matter was mentioned incidentally to me, and when I saw the veterinary some time afterwards he told me he had sold the animal to a bailiff of the Roumanian United Greek Archbishop, who lived in a magnificent mansion about thirteen miles from my station. This bailiff did a little business in the way of horse-dealing on his own account, and was allowed to keep his cattle in one of the numerous stables surrounding the great courtyard of the archiepiscopal palace. Time went on, and I forgot all about the mare. We had ceased purchasing horses, and the vet. had returned to Pest, but one evening I received a letter in which I was informed that this bailiff had never paid for the animal. He had, it appears, given the sub-agent ten florins to bind the bargain, and had promised

to send the balance the next day, but he had entirely failed to keep his word, and many letters had remained without an answer. I was directed to inquire what he had done with the mare and her foal, and to endeavour to obtain the sum in question. I found that he had sold the foal when it was six months old for almost as much as he had promised to pay, but had not paid, for the mare, and that the latter was still in the Archbishop's stable, in the compartment reserved for the bailiff's horses. I called on him several times without success, and at last, failing to find him, I wrote a strong letter threatening legal proceedings unless the mare was paid for. He had the impertinence to reply that he had paid for her long ago, and that the agent must have kept the money. Now, this agent was a very old servant of the company—a man who had been trusted with untold gold, and who would as soon have thought of putting in his pocket the paltry price of the horse as he would of flying. He was, however, now several hundred miles away. When written to he answered by forwarding press copies of the various letters demanding payment he had sent to the bailiff and the latter's replies, by which it was clear that the statements made to me by the purchaser were entirely fictitious.

In another sketch I may describe the difficulty in obtaining justice in Transylvania. I had already had bitter experience of the venality of the judges, and of the impossibility of obtaining any decision against the great ones of the land. Among the latter no one was greater in this particular locality than the Archbishop, and there was at that period no judge in the district who would have decided a case against either the Archbishop himself or any of his *employés*. I put this before my chief, and inquired how I was to proceed.

"Do as you please," answered he. "I want the money or the mare. I will see you through it."

This hint was enough for me. I was not personally known in the Archbishop's palace, except as an Englishman always on the look out for horses, so having ascertained that the bailiff was out of the way, I walked in one day and asked one of the

fellows who was loitering about whether there was anything to sell.

"Oh!" he said, "the Archbishop never sells any horses."

"No," I answered, "but I understand the bailiff does."

"Yes," he replied; "I believe there are one or two horses in the bailiff's stable you can look at," and he led me into a corner of the yard, where several animals of different sizes and shapes were quietly nibbling the hay.

I spotted the mare in a moment.

"Are these all for sale?" I inquired.

"All," he said, "except the two that run in the bailiff's carriage, and the hack he is out on to-day."

"Which do you recommend?" I further asked. "I want something strong and sound."

He pointed to an ugly, bony bay gelding.

"That is the best of the lot," he remarked.

"All right," I said, "bring him out;" and out he was brought.

"Now," I said to the man, "would the bailiff object to my riding him round the village to try him?"

"Of course not," was the answer. "Nobody will buy a horse unless he has tried him. By all means get on; but have you got your own saddle? For we have no English ones."

"Well," I said, "my man is at the hotel there; I will go and call him."

Away I went, brought back my faithful Janos, and proceeded to saddle the ungainly brute. I took him round the village, and brought him back in about ten minutes, with a remark that did not like him much.

"Let us look at something else," I added. "What is that mare there?" pointing to the identical one in the corner.

"Oh, she's good enough," said the man, "but she's not so strong as the horse."

"Let us try her," I answered; and there were at once several willing hands ready to bring her out and saddle her, each of them hoping that if the rich Englishman bought the mare he

would get a tip, if only a few kreutzers. The mare was saddled and bridled. I got on her and quietly jogged out of the yard along the main street of the village, just as I had done with the horse, Janos after me on foot. "Now," I said, when we got opposite to the hotel; "Janos, that scoundrel of a bailiff stole this mare and I am going to steal her back. As soon as I get to the end of the village I shall gallop for home. You just quietly get the carriage ready as if you expected me back every moment, and don't you start till the alarm is given. Keep quiet as long as you can; if you drive off they will suspect something directly." Janos, an intelligent being, silently took off his hat, and on I jogged. Just beyond the village was an extensive sandy plain across which a gallop was most enticing. Two or three Hungarians from the archiepiscopal stable being still within hail, I thought it as well to re-assure them, and remarked to one of them "that the mare seemed to go well enough, but I should like to try her at a canter outside."

"All right, sir, go on," they answered; and further confidence was inspired by my inquiring what her price was, as I remarked "that it was no use my trying the horse if it was too dear for me."

"Oh, you will settle about the price with the bailiff," they replied. "If you like the mare you are sure to close the bargain. We know you English have plenty of money in hand."

So away I went, just about as hard as the mare could lay her feet to the ground. The three miles of plain were very soon covered, and I then pulled her into a steady canter, and brought her safely home in less than two hours.

Now, however, I committed a gross imprudence. Instead of at once sending the animal on to the railway station, even at the risk of tiring her out, I thought that fifteen miles at a round pace was as much as she was fit for, because she was totally untrained, and had evidently been fed on nothing but grass and hay. I therefore locked her up in my stable, resolving to send her on early in the morning, after she had had a good night's rest and a couple of feeds of oats. This care for the animal

(who was really a very nice mare) brought me into great trouble. I retired to bed rather triumphantly, thinking that I had outwitted the bailiff; but very soon after sunrise in the morning I was awakened out of my pleasant dreams by Janos walking in with a grin on his face, and saying, "If you please, your lordship, there are two gendarmes there, who insist upon speaking to your lordship at once. I *think*," he added, slily twisting his pork-pie hat round in his hand, "I *rather* think they have come about that mare."

"Is the stable door locked?" I inquired.

"Yes, my lord," he answered at once.

"Where's the key?"

"Here it is, my lord," said he, pulling it out of his pocket.

"Have you let them into the other stable?"

"Well," he answered, "they walked in while I was clearing the place out, and they looked round, and then said 'the mare is not here.' They seem to know her well enough, or at any rate they have got her description. They looked at your lordship's carriage horses, and said she was not there."

"What are they?" I inquired, as I hastily huddled on some clothes. "Are they Hungarians?"

"No, my lord," he answered; "they are Germans."

"Two Austrians," thought I to myself. "I can deal with them more easily." So I went out, clad only in my dressing-gown and unmentionables. It was a fine spring morning. There were the two gendarmes, with fixed bayonets, standing at the stable door waiting for me.

"We have come," said one of them, "to fetch a mare which you rode away on out of the Archbishop's stable yesterday."

"Well," I answered, "I don't think you will get the mare."

"We shall," they replied, "if she is here."

"By what authority," I asked, "do you come?"

"In the name of the law," answered the first speaker pompously, producing a search warrant duly signed by the magistrate of the nearest town, and entitling the bearer to break open doors and otherwise conduct the search as he might think

necessary, further empowering him, if the stolen property were found, at once to seize it, and bring the thief (myself) to be incarcerated in the town gaol, unless he gave substantial bail to appear when called upon. The mare, however, was in any case at once to be restored to her rightful owner (the bailiff). Carefully reading through this formidable document, I said, "Well, what do you propose to do?"

The man answered, "If you don't unlock this stable door we shall break it open, for we have reason to believe that the mare is inside."

I said, "What then?"

"Then," he said, "we shall take away the mare, and we shall put you under arrest, unless you give us bail that you will appear. You can easily do that; you have only got to deposit 100 florins with the village judge."

I planted myself securely across the door of the stable, and must now observe that the conversation had been carried on in German, which was quite unintelligible to all my people about me.

"Now," I said, fumbling in the pocket of my dressing-gown, "I don't want to be disagreeable, but this mare belongs to me. I did not steal her, but only took back what the bailiff had never paid for."

"Oh," growled the gendarme, "that has nothing to do with us. You can settle that with the judge. All we have got to do is to get the mare back."

"Nevertheless," I continued, still fumbling in my pocket, "I am in the right and intend to defend the right. The first who crosses the threshold of this stable is a dead man. I have a revolver here, with which I shall shoot you both down."

"Prepare to charge," called out the leader, lowering the point of his bayonet. His companion did likewise, and the two glittering weapons were within about three feet of my chest.

"Hold hard," I called out; "don't make asses of yourselves. Do I look like a horse-stealer?"

The leader grinned and dropped the point of his bayonet.

"Well, no, sir," said he. "I was very much surprised to hear it, but the fact is, you certainly did ride off with this mare right through the village in open day, and I am bound to do my duty and get her back."

"Now," I said, "before we proceed to extremities let us talk for a moment. I don't want to shoot either of you. I daresay you are very good fellows. You are strangers in this land as I am. We don't understand these people's infernal lingo, and they cheat us right and left. If you have your orders, so have I mine. My chiefs have been cheated out of this mare, and I was told to get her back or the money. The bailiff would not give me the money, so I took the mare. Why," I said, "you know that I should not steal the horse for myself! Look round the place. Does it look like a thief's house?"

They admitted that it did not, but, although somewhat shaken, the leader said that he must do his duty.

"Wait another minute," said I. "I have my duty to do as well as you. I have been ordered not to give the mare up, and I shan't give her up unless I am killed; but before you can get a bayonet into me I can get a bullet into you. Does it not seem ridiculous that three honest Germans (I called myself a German for the occasion) should murder each other for the sake of the Hungarian-speaking rascals who cheat one out of one's own money? Come," I said, "I will give you my word of honour as a gentleman that the mare shall not be moved out of the stable. Come away from the door, have some breakfast with me, and we will talk the matter over. If then you still insist upon having her, well, you shall take her."

To this they at last agreed, although the leader was somewhat doubtful whether he could trust my word of honour.

"Here is the key," I said to him, "take it yourself. I will trust you if you will not trust me."

The good Austrian consented. "Now," I shouted in German and then also in Hungarian, "let no one open this stable door, in any way while these gentlemen and myself are talking in the house." As both the gendarmes understood a little Hungarian

they saw that I intended to act in good faith. They repeated the order themselves in broken but expressive terms and followed me to the house. Meanwhile breakfast had been getting ready. My own consisted generally of a cup of tea and some eggs, or at most a beefsteak, but on this occasion I produced my very best and strongest Hungarian wine. It is golden as the finest hock, strong as the most fiery sherry, and insinuating as new milk. I don't think the poor gendarmes had ever tasted such liquor before. I filled them up, not wine glasses, but huge tumblers of it, and though at first they refused to do more than sip, the liquor was too good for them to persist in their resolve. As soon as the first tumbler was down they already began to thaw a little. I told them the whole history of the mare, and produced the letters, which, though neither of them could read with any facility, staggered them very considerably when they were read out to them.

"Now," I said, "the fact is, the thief has been caught. The horse he has stolen has been resumed by the rightful owner. It is not a theft, but it is a simple resumption of property. The bailiff never having paid for the mare, we might even demand the value of the foal. We shall, however, be satisfied if he leaves us alone."

"Well, but," argued the gendarme, "we have got orders to bring the mare back, and to arrest you, and how are we to get out of it? We would gladly do so if we saw our way."

Meanwhile the faithful Janos kept filling their glasses, and they were visibly becoming more inclined to treat with me.

I therefore continued: "But what fools you are—good-natured, kind men—but not equal to dealing with the rascals in this country. Have you seen the mare in my stable?"

"No," they answered.

"Well," I replied, "you can swear you have not seen her."

"Certainly," they both agreed, thumping their fists on the table.

"Well," I continued, "all you have to do when you get home

is to say that you could not find the mare, and you can bind me over to appear for judgment when called upon."

"That is a good idea," said the gendarmes; "we will think over that."

We discussed the new plan at some length, during which Janos was not idle. I of course stuck to my tea, but the gendarmes had made a large hole in the row of bottles which were standing in readiness in the outer hall. Both were rapidly becoming intoxicated.

"Now," I said to the leader, "old fellow, let me have the key."

He fumbled in his pocket, but was not able to produce it, so Janos helped him.

The key disappeared as if by magic. In another three minutes my faithful servant whispered that the mare was off.

"Now," said I to him, "take care of these men. See that they get plenty to eat and drink, but don't let them out of your sight. Put their guns in the corner, or they may hurt somebody."

They were no longer unwilling; and proceeding to the kitchen they stretched themselves out on a bench, and were glad enough to take an hour's rest after their fifteen miles' walk and heavy drink. Meanwhile the mare was safely got away to the railway, and by the time the dinner hour arrived she was far out of their reach. I was a little afraid of their awakening, which might have been unpleasant, but Janos was judicious enough not to rouse them till the table was spread with the most tempting viands. At the sight of these and some more of the favourite wine they forgot all about the mare.

They steadily continued drinking all the afternoon, and finally departed towards evening, carrying their guns anyhow, constantly stumbling over their swords, their hair all ruffled, one of them wearing his shako with the peak backwards, and both looking as disreputable and as drunk as two men possibly could. They even forgot to bind me over to appear, and the bailiff hearing that I had all the letters in my hands thought it better

that his character should not be torn to pieces in a court of law. I heard no more of him, except that he was the laughingstock of the whole district for some weeks to come, and that the favourite joke was to tell him that the Englishman had a mare to sell, which never failed to make the poor man wince. But the point of the whole proceeding was that I never had a revolver in my pocket at all, and that if the gendarmes had persisted in advancing on the stable I must necessarily have either retreated from the door expeditiously, or have been stuck through like a butterfly. It is needless to say that I should have preferred the former course, for my sense of duty did not go so far as to make me sacrifice my life for the sake of the mare; but having no revolver handy I thought I might as well pretend, with the result I have endeavoured to describe.

A QUEER FOX.

THE terrible adventures I am about to relate occurred one Christmas-tide in a country place scarcely more than thirty miles from London, to which I had gone full of hopes of enjoying a week's sport with the excellent pack in the neighbourhood.

Winterdale is an old house, but by no means a melancholy one. It contains indeed a grand hall, panelled in oak and hung with ancestors, whose portraits may have come from Wardour street or not. At any rate, as they have nothing to do with my story, and as the cheery family who occupied the place made no secret of its having been purchased by their late uncle only twenty years before, it does not much matter whether the pictures were genuine or not. They were black and brown, but not sad, and the great hall contained the modern institution of a full-sized billiard-table. The sitting-rooms were cheerful, and faced the little sun which an English climate vouchsafes at this season. None of the bed-rooms, except one, was at all ghostly, and this one exception of course fell to my lot. It was situated in the turret, accessible by a little stair of its own. Its large window was composed of three lattices, each with diamond-shaped panes in metal frames, whence the outlook was on the quadrangle, with

a queer old fountain in its centre. But what was ghostly about the room was not terrifying to one well acquainted with old Winterdale. There was simply a nest of owls in the thick ivy near the window, and these owls snored melodiously with a gentle soothing sound. Strangers from town had been known to make violent efforts to discover their neighbours, and finally to summon the servants in alarm; but no such feelings affected me. I looked on the owls as old friends, and was lulled to sleep by their snoring. For I must confess that I had established, or thought I had established, an "understanding" with pretty Edith Vane, the niece of my good friend the host. We were not positively and formally engaged, but she probably knew that I loved her and was ready to marry her at the shortest notice; while I fancied that she loved me, and would accept me whenever I asked. But there appeared in fact, no occasion to pop the question. It seemed to be silently taken for granted by everyone that I should marry Edith. Squire Middleton, her uncle and guardian (for she was an orphan with a moderate but sufficient fortune) fully approved, and had no hesitation in telling me so when we two were alone. Mrs. Middleton gave us every opportunity of being together; her young daughters, though they were still children, respected our *tête-à-têtes;* and even the boys, though they were troublesome after the manner of their kind, seemed to comprehend the situation. This Christmas I was the only male visitor, except young Knighton of the Guards, and two perfectly inoffensive married men, both with their wives, and both satisfied with their lot. These two were calmly chewing the cud of matrimony, and Knighton, who might have been a dangerous rival if he had chosen, was a dear good fellow, and evidently gauged the position with great judgment, for at the Christmas dinner I sat next to Edith, and afterwards Knighton carefully got out of my way whenever I wanted to talk to her—which, by-the-by, was the whole evening. We had, therefore, a very good time. One of the wedded couples sang duets; there was a glee by the children, led by their cousin; there was a good deal of pleasant, if not witty,

conversation, and there were glad anticipations of the meet on the morrow.

At that time Bank holidays had not yet been invented, but the 26th of December was so generally kept as a festival that a very large assemblage was expected at Winterdale, where the hounds were first to draw the home coverts, which always held one fox at least, and often a leash. And of course the Squire and his wife were full of the hunt breakfast, to which all comers were to be called in, and were eagerly discussing various details of the repast. Mr. Middleton himself, though a capital sportsman, was no longer a hard rider. The contingent from the house was to consist of himself, myself on my favourite old grey mare, whom I had "boxed" from town on the previous day, Captain Knighton on one of the Squire's animals, the eldest daughter on her Welsh pony, and Miss Edith Vane on her own favourite hunter. She was a very ardent sportswoman, and though she rode boldly and straight, never allowed her love of riding to interfere with hunting, of which she knew more than most women. It was, in fact, on a hunting day a year before that she and I had first become intimate—a day on which, by a lucky chance, no one was with the hounds except the huntsman and we two.

But to return to the Christmas in question, I retired full of happiness and dinner, well content with my charmer and with the viands and wines placed before us by our kind hostess. The wind was in the south-west, the weather was fine and open, my mare, whom I visited for a moment over my after-dinner cigar, was "as fit as a fiddle"—in fact, everything appeared *couleur de rose*. Alas! if I had anticipated even a tithe of the next day's events I should scarcely have gone to bed in such good spirits. I should certainly not have shaken Knighton so warmly by the hand, thanking him by my silent pressure for having allowed me to monopolise Miss Vane all the afternoon and evening. I should not have dropped off into a pleasant slumber, with visions of foxes, horses, hounds, fences, and a fair maid all mixed up, floating before my closing eyes. And I should not have gazed

with admiring emotion at the lovely cream of the tops I was to wear on the fatal morrow.

Fatal! yes, indeed, it was, from the very commencement. There was a little wicket-gate which led into the home covert, and this I kept open at some trouble to myself, and not without fidgeting the mare, to enable Miss Vane to pass through when horses and hounds at last moved away from the lawn in front of the house. But she did not follow me as I expected. I saw her turn down the covert side between Knighton and her little cousin, not even noticing my position. And as the gate opened outwards I had the greatest difficulty in getting round it while a crowd of horsemen were crushing through. When I did, it closed on me, and inflicted a violent blow on the mare's quarters. She plunged and jumped sideways into an enormous puddle just within the gate, covering one side of me with mud. My cream tops were ruined for the day, the whiteness of one "breech" entirely obliterated, so that that of the other was ridiculous instead of being elegant. Jogging on in no very amiable frame of mind, a whimper soon told that a fox was on foot, and as the cry was taken up by one hound after another, I felt that they were drawing away from me—that the fox appeared likely to break on my left, so that those who had remained outside the covert would get by far the best of it. As Miss Vane was among them I tore away for the gate on the opposite side, through which a more fortunate man was galloping ahead of me. Careless of consequences he let the gate go, and this time it struck me instead of the mare, inflicting such severe pain on my knee that I very nearly fell off. There was, however, no time to do more than groan, for the rest of the field were bearing away to my left, while the hounds had already got a fence between themselves and the nearest horsemen. We were out of the park, and would, as I knew, get into a beautiful country after crossing the London road. The nearest point, and the one for which the fox was probably making was Roxborough Gorse, about six miles off. I do not quite understand how it was, but at the time I certainly thought that I saw Edith and Knighton ahead of me, though

rather on my left, riding side by side. But I must have been mistaken, for after taking one or two small fences they were not among the few in front, and yet I felt sure that I had not passed them. Now we jumped into the road—a high paling out of which some charitable footman had torn a few planks, leaving but an unprotected little ditch. The place on the far side was more formidable—a stake and bound fence with a biggish ditch in front, and the unknown behind. Hounds clambered over it, and could be seen swarming up the big grass-field, two hundred yards away, as I landed in the road. Whether the mare was thrown out of her stride by a passing cart, or whether I rode badly at the place, I know not. At any rate, she blundered, caught her hind legs in the tough wattles, lurched, tried to recover herself, and finally fell heavily on her head. Of course I was also on my head, or at any rate on my hat; I scrambled up however, almost as soon as the mare, but I had lost the reins, and she was careering away across the grass at her own sweet will. Certainly a most painful position, yet one so common as to excite at most a smile, never any pity. What could *I*, what could any man do but run after my horse? And before I had run ten yards, who should come over the fence, side by side, but Miss Vane and Captain Knighton? "Catch my horse," I gasped to the latter, "there's a good fellow." But I could scarcely believe my ears. They both roared with laughter. No doubt my appearance must have been pitiable in the extreme—my hat crushed in, my coat torn, breeches and boots covered with mud, and a big splash on my left cheek. Yet I could not have supposed that Edith would have been so cruel to one who was all but her affianced husband. It did not strike me at the time that even affianced husbands may look irresistibly funny. As they cantered by, Knighton sent me the ruthless Parthian shot, "The pace is too good to catch horses, old fellow!" and away they went, never casting a glance behind, nor did even a pitying look come from my beloved Edith. How my mare was caught I cannot tell. I suppose some friendly rustic brought her to me; at any rate, I was soon on her back again, riding hard

to make up for lost time, and, above all, anxious to regain my reputation as a horseman in the eyes of my *inamorata*, and to wipe out the stains of mud and ridicule by bold feats. Hounds again ran hard, after a short check had enabled me to get on terms, and I came up with the runaway couple hand over hand. They were riding steadily and well, Knighton letting Edith go first at fences where there was but one convenient gap, while he rode a few yards wide of her when it was possible to do so. But they seemed to have so much to say to each other that they never noticed my approach. I, however, had ample time to observe that his pink was still effulgent, his cords white as the driven snow, and even his boots only speckled with a few tiny spots of mud, which like patches on a fair woman's face, served but to enhance their brightness. The camellia-bud which had adorned his button-hole was gone—but where? A glance told me. It was in Edith's habit. A fierce pang of jealousy shot through my heart as I cried, "Here I am, Edith; all right again, you see." A cold somewhat supercilious look, and the words, "I am glad of it, Mr. Wanderer; but my name is Vane," chilled me to my very bones. And before I could reply she had turned to her companion, and saying, "The hounds are running left-handed; come on, Captain Knighton," had slipped through a handy gap and disappeared behind a hay-rick.

Of the next ten minutes all I know is that the weather became gloomy as my heart, and that hounds ran harder than ever, the stout fox having been turned by a flock of sheep from his line towards Roxborough Gorse. He was now probably making for the earths in Fairdown, several miles to the left. Determined not even to look at the faithless girl and my false friend, I was still more determined to outride them, and jamming the remains of my hat over my forehead, I set to on the old mare as if I had been riding in the Derby. Regardless of fallow, plough, or swampy fields, I of course soon cleared the ruck, and few were inclined to go at my pace, which threatened to become fatal to a hound or two before long. I was galloping hard at an innocent-looking fence, the huntsman, Master, and a few more on my left,

"I seized the trophy and held it up aloft"

all the rest, including Knighton and Edith, some lengths behind. "Hold hard, sir!" shouted the Master, and "'Ware wire! 'ware wire!" was screamed by all within screaming distance. But what cared I for wire? The loss of my mare, much as I valued her, did not weigh a grain in the balance, for I had lost Edith, who was all to me. Even, however, had I cared, the warning shout had come too late. The subtle trap caught the gallant chestnut, and sent her rolling over into the field beyond. This time I had a firm hold of her bridle, and stood up to see that she had cut both her forearms right across, as if with a long, straight knife, and was bleeding freely; but otherwise she seemed unhurt. I felt it was neck or nothing. "Let her bleed," thought I; "my heart is bleeding too." And jumping on again, I found that she was not lame, but still able and willing to go. I was now alone with the hounds, but the clouds thickened round me, and threatened to conceal my glory from the two people I most wished to astonish. Heavy rain-drops began to fall, and in the gloom I could only just see the pack racing away over the grass altogether, and evidently close to their fox's brush. Another fence or two, and still I was alone, still the gloom darkened, and the hounds ran harder. Through the pouring rain I just descried what I took to be the fox tearing along the next hedge-row. A dig of the spurs, and I was up with the hounds, whose noses and eyes had been quicker than mine, for they had caught him and tumbled him over—at least I thought so. I was off the mare in a moment. The poor thing no longer wanted to run away. I seized the quarry, and held it up aloft with a "whoop," which somehow sounded feeble and hollow. It was blacker and darker than ever. My "whoop" was answered by a duet of laughter, soprano and tenor together. There, just before me, were Edith and Knighton! How did they get there? How did it all happen? And as the two horses stood close together, their heads wearily hanging down, *Knighton actually placed his arm round Edith's waist!* And Edith laughed again, and said, pointing to me, "Look at him!

He has caught Mrs. Middleton's cat at last! Poor thing!" Then they both laughed.

Horror! Was it a cat? I looked at the mangled remains I had been triumphantly holding up aloft. There was no mistake; I recognised the yellow stripes and green eyes of the favourite Winterdale tabby. How did this come about? Where was the fox? Surely those hounds had not been running a cat all the time? Surely no cat would make a ten mile point at the pace we had come? While these puzzling thoughts came crowding into my brain, while Knighton's arm was still lovingly entwined round Edith's waist, fettering my eyes to the spot, I let my arm drop, and poor pussy's carcase was within reach of the hounds. In a moment they all rushed at me. I was down in the mud, and they fought for the cat over my prostrate body. A sudden clap of thunder seemed to disperse them and relieve me from the many-footed weight. Then again it thundered, more loudly than before—

"Half-past eight, sir, and a fine morning. Time to get up!"

I did get up. At any rate, I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Hounds, thunder, gloom, cat, and all had disappeared. Before my bed stood my James, my man-of-all-work, with a jug in one hand and my breeches on his arm; the winter's sun was shining in through the diamond lattices. The whole, then, was a dream? I could scarcely realise it. I said, "Where's the cat?" —in unwitting prophecy of the question which was, years after, displayed on all the London hoardings. "Cat, sir? There ain't no cat in your room, sir. The mare's all right, and the Squire says as how you had better not be late, because the 'ounds will be here at half-past ten."

It *was* a dream, all a hideous dream; but I was still much affected by it. After I had plunged into my bath I gradually found out that the heavy Christmas dinner must have upset me, that the several blows of swinging gates and my repeated falls were symptoms of nightmare, and that the thunder proceeded from Jim's hard knuckles on the door. My hat was glossy as ever; my cords were white, and my knees uninjured. Knighton's

arm was not round Edith's waist, no cut disfigured the mare's legs, nor did the hounds run a cat for ten miles. But one good result remained. Before I had brushed my hair I debated within myself whether it would not be expedient to propose at once; and as I donned my pink I made up my mind to put an end to all doubts on that very morning. And I did not allow this resolution to fail. It was not the keen morning air alone which made Edith Vane's cheeks flush as she stood on the steps of Winterdale waiting for the hounds, nor was it only joy at the fox having broken cover which made me shout "Gone awa-ay!" with a voice loud and ringing. Gone away! It was gone away from solitude, gone away from single blessedness, the run of married life was before us. So far it has been a very pleasant one—not over fast, not without awkward fences, but still a fine hunting run. May it remain so to the finish.

THE BARON IN THE SHIRES.

WE were sitting round the fire in the "hunt room" at the George. I shall not inform my readers of the exact locality of the George. Let them guess it for themselves when I state that this hostelry boasts of providing excellent accommodation for both man and beast, for the latter consisting of many rows of loose-boxes, and for the former of numerous comfortable bed-rooms and all the accessories the sporting Englishman requires; and that these quarters are in the middle of a capital hunting country, within easy distance of several fast and fashionable packs, and not a hundred miles from London. The George is just beyond the reach of the busy man, who rushes to the station and sees his horse "boxed" at 10 a.m. after having answered his morning's letters, and bolts back to town in time to dress for dinner, perchance leaving in the middle of a run because he is bound to catch the 4.40 train. Those who surrounded the fire, smoking the after-dinner weed on this February evening, were in no such hurry. Their tastes took them to the shires, and their duties did not prevent them from stopping there. Such correspondence as was unavoidable was carried on in the evening, or on an occasional day when there was no meet handy. When business became imperative it was transacted by a run up to town and an absence of a couple of days; so, of

course, we became friendly and sociable. The party was numerous, and consisted of members of various classes of society, but they amalgamated with that facility which is so much promoted by the hunting-field. Noble lords, lawyers, sons of horse dealers, officers, and mere idlers got on very well together somehow, and though, of course, there were certain *coteries* amongst us, on the whole we were all good friends. Thus, having discussed a fair dinner, we were discussing a fair day's sport when the evening post came in. There were letters for most of us, and silence prevailed for some time while we were reading them. Suddenly Roland, captain in the 50th Light Dragoons, one of our special favourites, for he was as pleasant a companion in the smoking-room as he was a good rider across a stiff country, uttered a joyful exclamation.

"What is it, Roland?" I asked. "Is your great aunt dead, and have you come in for twenty thousand a year?" For Roland was known to have expectations of an enormous though vague amount from an aged female relative, and always bought the best horses regardless of expense on the strength of the future fortune.

"No," he answered, "no such luck; but it's almost the next best thing—Baron Munchausen is coming down."

"Baron Munchausen?" we asked in chorus.

"Yes, the celebrated German sportsman. You all know of his wonderful adventures on the Continent—how, being short of ammunition, he loaded his gun with cherry-stones instead of shot, fired at a deer, and found the animal two years afterwards with a cherry-tree growing out of his back. How he took a pointer out one morning and walked after partridges so unwearyingly that the poor brute wore his legs down, and returned home a thorough-bred *Dachshund*. How another time, being benighted in the depths of winter, he tied his horse to a post in the snow and laid down to sleep beside it, and woke up in the morning to find himself at the foot of a church-steeple, his horse dangling by the bridle to a cross at the top of it, for a rapid thaw had set in, and the snow which had buried the church-

tower had melted overnight. Well, the hero of these and many other wonderful tales is coming to join our party."

"This is capital," we exclaimed. "How do you know anything about him, Roland?"

"Well," explained Roland, "I was introduced to the Baron two years ago, when boar-hunting in the Black Forest. He then said that he was rather *blasé* on German sport, and was inclined to try English hunting, of which he had heard so much. As he said he was a first-rater, and that he liked nothing so much as very fast galloping and lots of jumping, I recommended him to go down to Scantleborough and try Sir Wruff Wryder's Stag-hounds. Here's his letter."

And handing me the note he had just received, I read out the following for the benefit of the company:—

"My Dear Friend,—I have now your stag-hunting seen. Lord Wryder ('These foreigners call everybody a lord,' Roland remarked) has very amiable been; but, my dear friend, I like not your stag-hunting; for what a poor cattle in a box to drive about, him then to beat till he run, and him lastly to catch? No! it is not the noble sport. Give me one chase after the sly, the fast, the wicked fox. Herr von Wryder says that the best fox-hunt is where you have your residence. He also describes the George as one very good hotel. Therefore, my friend, have I decided myself at once to drive off. After to-morrow I hope to clasp you in my arms ('I'll take very good care he shan't,' ejaculated Roland). My horses will sooner arrive than I myself. I pray you let them be fed and warm-clothed.—With affectionate handpressing, remain I, your true friend,

"Munchausen, Baron."

"After to-morrow," said Roland. "The letter is dated the 11th; the beggar will be here to-morrow, I suppose. I must see our host about putting up his horses. He does not even say how many there are. But he is not far wrong about stag-hunting. It's poor fun after all."

"He burst into the Coffee Room."

We finished very near home next day, and arrived in time to see Baron Munchausen's horses being led into the yard. There were three of them, all covered up in gorgeous clothing, displaying a baron's coronet and a huge M in many places. There was an M and a coronet on each side of the horse's neck, one on each flank, and one on his back. The quarters were decorated in the same way, and the collar had no end of M's and coronets on it. One of the animals was evidently lame; the other two, when divested of their clothes (which they were as soon as they got into the stable, as we all wanted to see them), looked more like chargers than hunters. Heavy and rather straight shoulders, high quarters, thick necks, wicked eyes appeared to be their characteristics. A German groom accompanied them, who was far from communicative. But two hours afterwards his master arrived. He burst into the coffee-room just as we were sitting down to dinner, and after a sharp glance round the table, made straight for Roland with outstretched arms. We were all wondering how the gallant captain would escape the intended embrace. He did it cleverly. Throwing out his right hand smartly, he seized the Baron's outstretched palm and pulled it violently towards him; thus swinging his friend round, and getting, so to say, at his flank, involuntarily the left hand was dropped, and Roland was able to give the right one so determined a squeeze, that, for the moment at least, all thoughts of osculation were forgotten. Then his proposed victim hastened to introduce him to some of the men standing round, so the ordeal was successfully overcome. It is now time to describe the Baron. He was a man nearer fifty than forty, nearly six feet in height, and rather inclined to stoutness. He could scarcely have ridden under sixteen stone, possibly over. His short hair was grizzled, while the long moustache, of which the points were carefully twisted and waxed, was still black. A short, somewhat stubby beard covered a portion of his double chin. He had bright black eyes, protected by a pair of spectacles, without which he was almost blind. His large mouth was generally opened in a good-humoured smile, displaying two

healthy rows of teeth. He was on this occasion attired in a long and wide fur cloak, with a small leather bag hanging diagonally from one shoulder, without which foreigners seldom seem able to perform the shortest railway journey. He wore a hunting-cap decorated with a fox's brush, and tall jack-boots with spurs. Of what use the latter were in a railway train we were at a loss to imagine.

"Will you sit down, Baron," asked Roland, "or change your clothes before dinner?"

"No ladies here?" answered the Baron; "then better at once eat; *un dîner réchauffé ne vaut jamais rien*. I am ver hungry."

In future the reader shall not be wearied with the Baron's peculiar phrascology. I shall translate his conversation into ordinary English, leaving to imagination the Anglo-German in which it really took place.

The Baron fell to most energetically. We felt rather alarmed at the frequent proximity of his knife to his mouth; but he showed great dexterity in scooping up the gravy with it without cutting his lips. He was too busy to talk much at first. Only when, after sundry entrées and a joint, he had disposed of a woodcock, carefully sucking its bones one by one and placing them neatly on his plate, did the edge of his appetite appear blunted.

"Have you seen my horses?" he asked Roland, who replied in the affirmative. "Very fine horses," continued the Baron; "the finest horses in England."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Roland: "all the better for you. You will show us the way, Baron. Is not one of them rather lame?"

"A trifle, a mere trifle! only a thorn in his foot. That is a wonderful horse—a cleverer horse than any I have seen here. He comes from Mecklenburg."

"The deuce he does!" I exclaimed, incautiously adding, "I thought they only bred carriage horses there."

"Carriage horses, my young friend? Let me tell you you

have something to learn. I, as I speak to you here," and he slapped his capacious chest, "can assure you that a more perfect hunter was never foaled. By-and-by I will tell you what that horse can do, then you will want to buy him. But he is not for sale, no, not for a thousand. Now, however, my friends, let me eat in peace."

We all thought he had already eaten plenty, but were evidently mistaken, as he set to work on the sweets with renewed vigour. At last, however, he seemed to have had enough, for, pushing his chair back from the table, and untying the napkin he had fastened round his neck, he asked for a smoke. We adjourned to the room already mentioned, and gathered round the Baron, who at once occupied the most comfortable armchair. "I want Hans," he remarked; "he must take my boots off." The suggestion of a bootjack was scouted, and after some little delay Hans came and pulled the big jack-boots off the fat legs which they encased, the Baron resting the foot which was not being operated on against his servant's shin to give himself a purchase. At length there he was, ready and comfortable. He lighted a long German pipe, which Hans filled with evil-smelling cabbage-leaves, stirred up his coffee, and began—

"I was talking of that horse of mine, the one you call lame, friend Roland. But I think I will not say any more about him, for fear you young people might get jealous. And I will not tell you how—no, no (moving his forefinger backwards and forwards). So I will be silent about him; besides, you might say I tell stories."

Of course we all assured the Baron we had implicit faith in his truthfulness, and that we would not express loudly our feelings of envy, even if, as was inevitable, we *did* covet the wonderful animal. He was at last induced to proceed—

"You see, I am a big man, gentlemen, and I want a big horse. But in hunting Munchausen must be with the dogs—Munchausen must not be left behind. So what shall I do? It is of no use my riding a Derby winner; he is fast, but he cannot jump. So

I have taught this horse various clever tricks—a very many. Often, you know, in your England you come to a gate; the gate is closed, and you must open it with your whip. That takes time. Now, my horse saves me this trouble. When he finds the gate closed he puts his head to the latch, pushes it down with his teeth, and then the gate is opened. No trouble, no danger of catching the whip in the gate—it is all done in a moment."

He gazed round proudly for applause. There was a subdued murmur of admiration.

"Now, gentlemen," continued he, "this is clever, but on my honour he can do more, much more. One day he came to a gate which was locked. The latch would not move; the gate had bars. One one side was a hedge *so* high (and he pointed to the ceiling), and on the other a wall. What is to be done? My horse knew very well. He moved to the other end of the gate, he stooped, put his head well under the top bar till it rested on his withers, then hoopla! one good lift, and the gate was off its hinges! Is that a fine horse?"

The murmur of admiration and wonder which followed this tale was evidently flattering to the Baron, who continued—

"One morning I mounted this horse in the stable-yard as usual, but he would not move. Generally he walked out willingly, stepping freely, and looking eagerly round. This day he would not budge. I whipped and I spurred—all was in vain. I got off. Perhaps the girths are too tight, or the curb chain hurts him? Not at all, all is right. Again I mount, and give him the rowels. No use. He rears, and refuses to proceed. I was in despair, and wondered what could be the matter. Just then my landlord's daughter ran out crying, 'Oh, Baron, I'm so glad you have not gone yet. You've forgotten your flask.' Sure enough I had left my old friend and faithful companion on the the table, and the holster was empty. My horse knew it, and would not go until my flask was brought, then he started willingly enough. Is not that a wonderful animal, gentlemen?"

"So wonderful that I can scarcely believe it," said young

Mills, an imprudent London man, who was often as bold in his language as he was at his fences.

"Not believe it, sir?" shouted the Baron, getting very red in the face, and jumping up. "Not believe it? How dare you doubt the word of a nobleman? I am Baron Munchausen, and no one has ever accused me of telling a lie. How dare you, sir? You must apologise or fight."

Roland had to intervene, and explain that Mr. Mills, being a stranger, had no idea of the Baron's reputation for veracity, but now that matters were made clear to him, he would hasten to apologise and believe. Mills, having been instructed by us in whispers, went up to the Baron and solemnly said, not without a twinkle in his grey eyes—

"Baron, I apologise most humbly for my hasty exclamation, which was called forth by the wonderful account of your horse's intelligence. I fully and entirely believe it, and beg to assure you that I had no intention of doubting your word."

"Very well then, young man, Baron Munchausen forgives you," answered the old gentleman, soothed again, and lighting his pipe; "but take the advice of a man older than yourself, and be careful in future.

"Now," he continued, addressing the company in general, "Mr. Mills's remark, for which he has asked my pardon, suggests another observation from me. You all admit that this horse is very clever; but, gentlemen, who taught him to be so clever? Why *I* did. Without Baron Munchausen (slapping his chest) that horse might have been quite an ordinary animal.

"In Germany," continued the Baron, "where I have spent the greater part of my life, and where I am well known, no one thinks of doubting my veracity, and everyone is aware that the highest personages in the realm have not been above being instructed by me. In riding and shooting I should like to find the man who can beat me. You *must* have heard of the deeds I have done, gentlemen? Every man in Europe has heard of them."

"Well, I have heard of the cherry stones," murmured Mills, apologetically.

"Cherry stones! That was nothing. That was shooting. Now I will tell you something about my riding. You fellows in England fancy yourselves a good deal, and as to all these gentlemen here, why, they suppose that no one can go across country as they can. I will tell you what *I* did once. I was out coursing one day on my place in Pomerania. The greyhounds were after a very strong, fast hare, and puss popped through a fence into a lane and across it into the field on the other side. I was riding a very bold, powerful horse, difficult to hold. Just as he was rising at the fence after the hounds, a pony chaise came along the lane with two ladies in it. I felt that I could not stop him soon enough, so I sent the spurs into him, and cleared chaise, ladies, and all. I had barely time as I jumped to take off my hat and apologise to them for the unwarrantable liberty. Now, gentlemen, what do you say to that?"

The fact is that we could not say anything. We were stupified.

"Perhaps you don't believe me?" almost shouted the Baron.

"Indeed we do," said Roland, anxiously, fearful of another row.

"So you ought," replied our friend, "for greater men than you have heard that story and believed it. Everyone knows that a Munchausen can't lie. Why the emperor himself believes it."

"Indeed?" asked the uncautious Mills.

"Yes, gentlemen, as true as I am here. His majesty, hearing the story, sent for me to Potsdam. I was invited to the royal and imperial dinner, and after that dinner the emperor, before all his court, said to me, 'Baron, I heard of that great jump of yours down in Pomerania. Tell me how it happened.' And I told the story just as I have told it you, and the emperor laughed kindly, and took me by the hand and said that he was glad there was so bold a rider in Germany, and one not afraid to tell of his adventures. The horse that jumped that lane is the one you have seen.

"But I will not pretend that that horse is perfect. If I were to make such an assertion, you would be perfectly justified, gentlemen, in calling me a liar. We all have our faults; why should

this horse alone be infallible? He has some queer ways, sometimes, and the very frankness with which I admit his weaknesses ought to prove to you—if any proof were needed—how truthfully I have described his character in other respects. He has a funny little temper, and this funny little temper nearly got me into serious trouble one day with the very ladies over whom I jumped in the lane. Shall I tell you the story?"

There was a chorus of "Please, Baron, do!"

"Very well, then, this is what happened. We had had a long day, and the horse was anxious to get home. I am no featherweight, as you see;" here the Baron slapped his capacious waistcoat, "and I think he had carried me about long enough. The ground was heavy, so was I, and there can be no doubt of the fact that the horse would have been very glad to get rid of me. We were slouching along the road, darkness was coming on, and it required all my experience to prevent the horse falling on his head from sheer fatigue. I heard the noise of wheels behind me, and soon I was overtaken by the same two ladies in their pony-chaise. That great jump had been a sort of introduction, and I saluted them politely, drawing my horse on one side for them to pass. But he did not appear to like the idea that two ladies should drive home comfortably while he had to trudge many miles with sixteen stone on his back. There was a tiny seat behind the phaeton; it was intended for the little groom, and was small and low in proportion. To-day, however, the ladies were alone, and the seat was empty. Hardly had the chaise passed me, when my horse pricked up his ears and trotted after it. I was quite pleased with his renewed liveliness, but my pleasure was of short duration, for coming up behind the carriage, he raised both his forefeet, and placed them carefully in the groom's seat, while he kept trotting on his hind-legs. He tried in fact, to get a lift home. But the position was unpleasant for me and alarming for the ladies. I have experienced all sorts of peculiar action, I know the Arab amble, the Turkoman run, the rough trotting of a heavy cart-horse, and the swaying of an elephant. But I had never tried the peculiar position of sitting

on a horse whose forelegs are conveyed in a carriage, while his hind ones are following on the road, and I cannot say that I liked it. 'Whip behind!' I cried. But the ladies were too much frightened to obey, and their pony was as frightened as they were, and trotted on faster than ever, so that my horse was actually obliged to *canter* with his hind-legs. I pulled at the reins, dug my spurs into the animal, whipped him unmercifully, all to no purpose. So I was reduced to talking to the ladies, and to soothe their alarm if possible. It was no easy task, for I felt myself continually slipping backwards. Yet I was bound to stick to my horse, for the chance was that if I got off he would simply allow the ladies to take him home, and be glad to have got rid of the extra weight. So I stuck to him, and tried to explain matters. At first my fair friends would not even listen, and only whipped their pony on. But at last my persuasive tones obtained a little attention, and when I had explained how entirely involuntary the whole affair was, and how entirely harmless the horse, one of them actually laughed.

'You had better get off, Baron,' said she, 'perhaps the horse will get off as well?'

'But if he does not?'

'Well, we will take our chance. Do get off.'

I did, rather more quickly than I intended, for she had hardly spoken, when a jerk of the carriage sent me down over his tail. Scarce had my—well, not my feet—touched the ground, when the horse removed his fore-legs from the carriage, and after a sort of salute towards my recumbent form, whisked his tail and trotted home. I had to walk. After this circumstance, my introduction to those ladies was complete, and I spent many pleasant evenings at their *schloss*. They were, like the emperor, always anxious to hear my adventures."

It was now nearly time to go to bed, but of course we turned in full of anxious expectation as to how the Baron would perform on the next hunting day.

THE BARON FROZEN OUT.

WAS on a day of intense frost — a week after hunting had stopped — that Mills and I were hurrying down St. James's Street. An Irish alarm had caused both of us to be hastily recalled from our comfortable quarters at the "George," so we had seen nothing of the great Baron Munchausen, who had arrived there with such a flourish of trumpets. But on this frosty day an apparition hove in sight which we could not mistake; a portly person enveloped in, and almost concealed by, a huge fur coat, of which the width was more remarkable than its length, decorated with a wide sable collar, a gorgeous silver clasp at the neck, and numerous hussar-like frogs all down the front. Above this garment was visible a fraction of the face of our much-admired Baron, his black moustache more ferocious, and his nose redder than ever. On his head was a fur cap, with lappets over the ears. We, as healthy young Englishmen, wore comparatively light overcoats, and were positively enjoying the cold after a couple of hours' skating. Indeed, we had for a few short moments quite forgotten that a number of horses were eating their heads off at

our expense, and that the hay and corn bill was rapidly increasing without our being able to get any fun out of it. The sight of the Baron, mirth-provoking though it might be, brought back all our melancholy recollections. But of course we greeted him enthusiastically. "Come out of the cold, Baron," cried Mills, "and have some lunch at the club;" to which he replied solemnly, "My young friend, it is indeed cold, though not what I have been used to in Russia. Yet, nevertheless, will I with pleasure your goodly invitation accept;" and he followed Mills up the wide steps of the Erechtheum, where whist and pool were always going on to distract the frozed-out hunting man. It was funny to watch the Baron being unfastened, and still funnier to watch the face of the well-bred attendant who took charge of his wraps. There seemed to be no end to these, and the Baron alone required four pegs in the rack. At last, however, he emerged—still very cold, but jaunty—a gay butterfly who had just crept out of the pupa and had not yet got used to the fresh wind. A short coat not much longer than a pilot-jacket, but with a very full skirt, which stuck out on all sides, particularly behind, and was trimmed with Astracan fur. A heavy gold chain round the neck, which went meandering down to an outside breast-pocket, where the watch was concealed. A scarlet scarf, with an elaborate stag's head of enormous size (brow, bay, and tray, and two on top), doing duty as a pin. Breeches of thick plush, warm in texture and warm in colour; high boots, lined with fur, and displaying a very handsome trimming of the same fur round their tops. Finally, the inevitable spurs, and the inevitable crop, with a very large thong (which, however, was left outside). Such was the Baron's get-up, and you may imagine that it created some little sensation in the crowded coffee-room of the Erechtheum. It was felt that the man who had the audacity to appear in so eccentric a costume must be the Prince of Montenegro, or, at least, the hereditary Duke of Barataria. "Oh, my friends, my dear friends," he lamented, as we sat down, "what for a land is this! Against your honting I will nothing say, for is it not a noble field of valour and

chivalry?" ("War without its crime, and only a tenth of its danger," murmured the incorrigible Mills, quoting Jorrocks, for the thousand-and-oneth time). "But, my friends, what for houses, what for fires, what for draughts! So thin are the walls that I, who am by no means a stout man (!), do not dare to lean against them! Large is the fire, but the warmth goeth up the chimney. And the draughts! Have they not caused that tooth to ache which was drawn twenty years ago, and must long ago have disappeared into the ewigkeit? Nowhere is a man safe. I have tried, my friends, at the 'George' to stop for thaw-weather waiting. But it did not go. Five shillings every day in coals I have spent; but I was cold. Five shillings every day in comic papers and what you call annuals I have spent; but I was dull. Ten shillings every day in wine I have spent; but I was sober. Ten shillings, too, in food; but I could not eat, for there was no change. *Ach*, chops, steaks, steaks, chops; sometimes a leg of mutton—it a man wearieth. No society fit for a Baron even, much less for a Baron Munchausen; no riding, no shooting, no nothing! *Ach*, my young friends, I am glad to see you; glad, very glad!"

And then the terrible happened—that catastrophe which a fortnight previously we had made great and successful efforts to guard against. But it happened in a much worse form than if it had occurred at the "George." *There*, at least, we were among ourselves; *here* there were fifty or sixty strangers lunching, staring, and listening, and only two or three friends scattered among them. *There* we had expected it, and dodged it; *here* it came with a sudden surprise, startling as the explosion of a powder magazine, almost as terrible in its effects.

Before we could suspect what was going to happen, the Baron stood up, leant across the little table, fell on Mills's bosom, and kissed him on both cheeks. I will not describe the effect on the company assembled. To attempt to picture Mills's utter and hopeless humiliation would be to attempt the impossible. Suffice it to say that a convicted forger in the felon's dock looks cheerful in comparison. Fortunately for me the Baron's affection had,

naturally enough, first vented itself on his host, so I had time to escape. I yelled out frantically, though I was not in my own club, "Waiter, when is that curry coming?" And I believe the waiter, good man, saw into my heart, and perceived that I only wanted to effect a diversion, not to scold one who was not my servant. At any rate the danger was over for the moment. Though choking with suppressed emotions, the Baron said, "Now let us eat," and fell to with a vengeance. Mills's shame became gradually less acute, and as he took care to send round the whisper that it was "that eccentric nobleman Munchausen," a respectful curiosity gradually replaced the former contemptuous stare. In the smoking-room the Baron sent for his long pipe, which it appears was ingeniously concealed in a narrow slit of his great fur cloak, and soon a circle of members formed round him, in the hope of hearing a few of his stories. Nor was this hope disappointed, for the Baron himself began to tell us of his adventures after we had left the "George." I again convert his peculiar English into more intelligible language.

"You recollect, my friends," he said, "that before I joined you for the chase of the fox I had been hunting the fatted calf with Sir Wruff Wryder? You remember, also, that wonderful horse who opened the gate himself, and would not let me leave home without my flask? Well, my friends, this is what that horse did when we were with the stag-hounds. It was a long run, and, as usual, he galloped and jumped with the best. At last the stag ran to the sea and plunged in, the hounds behind him. They were called back, but the deer would not return to land, and we feared he would be drowned. So said the huntsman, 'What shall we do?' and I replied, 'I will show you.' I jumped off my horse, and pointing to the stag, now only a speck on the horizon, I said, in German, to him, 'Go and turn that deer.' As ordered, so it was done. My steed pricked up his ears, rushed into the waves, and swam out boldly. He soon headed the deer, and turned him towards the shore. Whenever the animal tried to face towards the open sea my horse met him, and splashing the water with his fore-feet frightened him in

shore again. Very soon the deer landed and was secured, and as soon as the horse saw that all was safe, he also emerged, shook himself, and came trotting up to me. Now give me a light for my pipe."

There was a good deal of suppressed laughter in the room, and for a moment the Baron glared fiercely round through his spectacles. But during the recital of the tale Mills had sent round sundry little pencil notes warning his friends against any demonstration of incredulity; the signs of hilarity, therefore, soon subsided. Our old friend, however, was too sharp to pass them by entirely without notice. He proceeded:—

"A great deal of nonsense, gentlemen, has been talked about my adventures. They have been exaggerated and distorted by big liars, so that you would sometimes imagine that I am a big liar too. Many of the stories related of me are impossible, and yet *I* have to bear the responsibility. Now, for instance, I dare say you have heard it said that once, when out hunting, the hounds ran across a deep lane with high hedges each side, and that, being unable to stop my horse, I jumped right through the windows of a carriage which was just then passing in the lane. This is not true. I never said such a thing, and if I had said it, you would have been right to disbelieve me. What really occurred was this—I jumped *over* an open pony carriage which was driving down the lane, and in doing so just had time to raise my hat to the ladies in it. This was all. But the man who first accused me of stating that my horse and I had jumped through two carriage windows is not only a liar, but a fool!" Then, gazing round, Baron Munchausen added, "Now you see I have no hesitation in telling the plain, simple truth, though I might appear a greater hero if I accepted the fabulous story narrated of me. But a Munchausen never lies, no never."

"Hardly ever," suggested a wag *sotto voce*, but he was instantly suppressed, and, as the Baron did not know "Pinafore," no harm was done.

He looked at his watch. "I must go," he said. "I am waited for; but I will just tell you one more trait illustrating

the cleverness of the horse who turned that stag and of the man who taught him—no other than myself.

"A day or two after you left the 'George' a very bold fox took us across a difficult country. We came to a brook. There were two in front of me, and both fell in. I thought the width might be beyond my horse's powers, so I steered him for a place where I saw a tree with a strong branch overhanging the stream and almost reaching the other side. As he rose gallantly to the jump, which was indeed formidable, I seized the branch with both hands, and swinging myself upwards and forwards relieved the horse of my weight. Thus he was able to clear the brook safely, and as he landed on firm ground I dropped back quietly into the saddle. Yes, they teach gymnastics well in my country."

Then, rising, he knocked his pipe out against the fender, shook everyone warmly by the hand, was frustrated in trying to embrace Mills and myself, and retired to don his big fur coat.

A MEET AND A PARTING.

WAS a fine sunny morning towards the end of March. Our uncertain climate often favours us thus early in the year, with days not unworthy of the ancient traditional but long since forgotten reputation of May. Fresh yellowish buds were appearing all over the hedges, the meadows were clothed in pleasant green, the birds were busy preparing for their future families, and were flying hurriedly backwards and forwards in and out of the trees, which as yet showed no other sign of spring. In the favourite hunting county of Meadshire the roads were hard and dusty, and the fields were fast drying up, while the agriculturists were "making-up" their fences, so that no surprise was felt when it was announced that this very day would be the last of the season for the Meadshire foxhounds. Horses were showing signs of hard work, for it had been an open winter, and even the most enthusiastic of sportsmen (among whom I reckoned myself), was unwillingly forced to admit that hunting could not continue much longer. So with hearts somewhat heavy, not-

withstanding the brightness of the day, we jogged over to Farmer Dale's, where a start was to be made by drawing Stokington Gorse. In the large meadow, just below the comfortable homestead, a goodly company was assembled. There was the popular Master, of course; a modern Squire Western, in his pink, which had become plum-coloured, good old-fashioned leathers and drab gaiters, riding a powerful brown who had seen his best days and looked rather "nobbly" about the fore-legs. There was the Master's little daughter on a sturdy Exmoor pony, and his son, home for the holidays, on one a little larger. Schoolboys in turn-down collars and jackets, on hired screws, others in regular hunting dress on their own or their father's cobs, formed a juvenile group in one corner. Dotted about among the landowners of the country were several sporting farmers; the elder ones on steady and powerful hunters, the younger on colts they were "making." Every now and then one of them would break away and perform various antics in a distant part of the field, till the steady hands and firm knees of its rider brought him back quietly to the main body of the sportsmen. There was a large contingent of London men present; these were all in irreproachably correct dress, with boots shining like a mirror, tops of the most tender pink, and spurs reflecting the sunlight in numberless little twinkles. Their horses' coats were as glossy as their own hats, and their gloves still unstained by mud or weather. But all these various riders, diversified as they were by the numerous sportsmen on foot, loafers, and boys who had attended to see the hounds "throw off," failed to attract my attention, which was, on this occasion, concentrated on one single object in the lively picture. It need scarcely be observed that this object was a lady, and that the lady was young. She was mounted on a handsome chestnut mare, whose lean head and small ears denoted high breeding. Impatiently pawing the ground, and champing at her bit, she seemed to be restrained without difficulty by a small hand which stroked her arched neck, and by the gentle voice which occasionally said, "Steady, Lucy, steady." The pretty mare was

ridden by a still prettier rider. A small neatly poised head, a graceful and girlish, but soft and rounded figure, a short habit, below which peeped out the tip of a tiny booted foot; a knob of fair hair tied back under a round "pot" hat; a straight little nose, a rosy mouth, which displayed every now and then, in return for doffed hats, two rows of pearly teeth; eyes brown, under brown eyebrows, which contrasted rather strangely with the fair hair and bright healthy complexion. Such was Kate Chiltern, the daughter of a neighbouring squire, one of the hardest riders as she was undoubtedly one of the prettiest girls in the country. She had been away on a visit in the South of England during the greater portion of the winter, so we had missed her graceful presence in the hunting-field, and I, for one, was delighted to welcome her again. I had been introduced to her the last time she had been out with the Meadshire, some three months ago, for though I had been desirous of making Miss Chiltern's acquaintance from the very first day on which I had seen the chestnut mare and her rider, an opportunity had not occurred until then. The Meadshire were too fashionable to be very sociable. So many men came down from London to hunt with them, so many new faces appeared at each successive meet, that the local ladies were a little reserved, and there was no opportunity for the general conversation so usual with a "provincial" pack. So I had to wait till a mutual friend introduced me, and men who hunt in a hard-riding country know that it is not always easy to find an opportunity for such an introduction, particularly if the gentleman who is to perform the office does so with some unwillingness, and the lady has not been prepared beforehand so as not to be racing at a fence just when the ceremony is about to be accomplished. When, at last, I was presented in due form, my false friend, anxious, as it appeared, to secure the lady's good graces, had merely mumbled my name, in return for which I received a gracious, but very brief bow; for at that moment a whimper sounded from the covert, and we all started off in a crowded scurry. Now that I met Miss Chiltern once more, she scarcely seemed to recollect

me, for my effusive bow, and my smile, which I sought to make as winning as possible, were responded to by a very slight inclination of the head, after which she at once turned to talk with the Squire. Nor was my annoyance diminished by the consciousness that on this last day of the season I was not at all well mounted, and might, if we had anything of a run, never be in the same field as my charmer. My best horse had been out two days before, my second best was dead lame, my third and last, on which I was now mounted, was a powerful but only half-trained four-year-old, scarcely sufficiently well bred for the Meadshire hounds, and certainly quite unfit to negotiate the heavy fencing, and to land with impunity on hard roads. In fact, I had long since determined to get rid of him, and was only persuaded by the temptations of a "last day" to appear on a horse who, I was sure, could neither jump high enough nor gallop fast enough. Would that I had allowed wiser counsels to prevail over the persuasions of my friends, and my own inclination to come out, if only to look on!

A couple of hours went by without our doing much. Fate seemed against sport generally, and against my getting near Miss Chiltern in particular. If I hurried to hold a gate open for her, she was sure to jump the fence; if I took a fence she went through the gate, and gave some other man a gracious smile for keeping it open. When we *did* find ourselves on the same side of some cover, she was always talking with the squire, or with her father, or some one else. In the perpetual dodging about from wood to wood, I was constantly losing sight of her altogether, and my endeavours to get near this special attraction actually made me head a fox back, a proceeding which brought me black looks from the whole field, and a good deal of strong language from the squire, who wanted to know what I meant by tearing about in that manner, and suggested that some of these London men had better stop in the metropolis, instead of coming down to Meadshire to spoil sport. This was an awful blow to me, for I prided myself not only on my riding, which I need scarcely tell my readers, I considered perfect, but also on my

compliance with the rules of the noble art generally. I collapsed, but hope revived in my breast when a fox at last broke away, and the hounds followed in full cry, diagonally across a large grass field. The majority kept along the cover side, towards a gate on the right, which led into a lane; a few bolder ones stuck to the line, and among them was Miss Chiltern. What booted it that the hedge looked black as night, and that beyond the hedge might be a ditch, or a rail, or chaos itself? As she went, I must needs go too. Her speedy mare of course went faster than my cross bred horse, and she reached the jump first at the only negotiable place, a few yards in front of me. The huntsman had shown us the way: it was under a tree, where as usual the hedge was thinner than elsewhere. But it was a place which one was bound to take slowly, for the branches were low and overhanging, and the ground rose till it formed a steep bank, so that no one could see what was behind. There was a warning shout from the huntsman, then Miss Chiltern rode at it. Is it possible? I thank beneficent fate for this at least. The chestnut, after dwelling a moment, refused, and her rider had to turn her round to get out of the branches.

"Let me have a try," I cried boldly, though with sinking heart, "perhaps your mare will follow," and pushed my young one at it. He, also, dwelt on the bank, and indeed it was not a pleasant sight. There was a yawning ditch just under it, and the lane was ever so far down, while if one escaped without a fall, the hard road must be terribly trying to a horse's legs. However, what cared I for my horse when Miss Chiltern was waiting to go over, and when I had a chance of showing her the way? So I plunged both spurs into him, and down he came on the stony surface with a bang which nearly threw me out of the saddle. Then the chestnut flew over the place like a deer, and turning down the lane we had an easy jump into the next field.

"Thank you," said the fair girl to me, smiling, as she tore over the dusty plough, where my horse had still less chance than on the grass, and once more she was in front, but not

far, for now that we were fairly away, I could hold my own, and keep her in sight at any rate. Through a gate into another large field, up a hill, along the top of which ran a double post and rails which no one in their senses would try, as there was no room to land between them. The hounds were going straight across them, swarming through as we entered the field, but the leaders seemed to incline rather to the left. There was, of course, some hesitation. On the left was an awkward but passable fence, in front of us a complete barricade. The ranks closed up, Mr. Chiltern, the fair Kate's father, cried out, "There is a gate down here," and tore away to the extreme right, the greater number after him. His daughter, however, was less prudent.

"We can't leave the hounds," she said to one of the local hard riders, the very man who had introduced me to her, "papa never will jump if he can help it." And almost before she had spoken, young Newton went at the fence on the left, jumped it handsomely, and she followed. Of course I went too, and as I jumped it, I saw Newton clear the next one, after a sharp turn to the right. Miss Chiltern pulled up. I looked back: there was nobody with us. "I don't like these binders," she said, "Mr. Newton only just got over, and he has got a wonderful horse."

They were certainly very high. It was not inviting at all. Yet we heard the cheery cry of "Forr'ard, forr'ard!" and the sound of the horn. Hounds were evidently running hard. Turning my young one round, I put him resolutely at the high, clean-cut hedge, which looked like a perfect basket of wattle. He refused. I drove him at it again. He refused again, though his flanks were bleeding from the spurs. Now it was her turn to cry, "Let me try;" but the mare, probably alarmed at my animal's persistent refusals, declined to attempt it. "We cannot be beaten like this," I exclaimed, and at last forced the brute through by the sheer weight of his body, for he would not rise a bit. But precious time had been lost, and there was no one in sight, while the sound

of the horn was wafted to us faint and ever fainter on the soft air. Miss Chiltern might have galloped away from me, for her weight was much less, and her horse much speedier than mine; but though I said, "Go on, Miss Chiltern, never mind me," she shook her pretty little head silently, and held her mare tight.

Through a handy gate, into another big grass field, with another horrible fence at the far side. This looked absolutely awful. It was about eight feet high, and though one might have pushed through it by speed, weight, and pluck combined, such an attempt was rendered impossible by the precautions of the farmer, who had fortified it by powerful rails securely fastened to the substantial black-thorn stems with withies.

"This is the only weak place," Miss Chiltern called out. "Just under the tree there. The hedge is thin, and we can jump the rails." She tried, but again the mare refused, as, indeed, was not surprising. My horse did the same, and while I was busy spurring, whipping, and, I fear, using anything but parliamentary language, Miss Chiltern galloped along the hedge to look for a better place. "We cannot get through anywhere else," she said in a desponding tone, as she returned to watch my fruitless efforts; "Oh dear! I am afraid we shall never see the hounds again."

This grief was too much for my feelings. I threw myself off my horse, and endeavoured to remove the top rail. I ran splinters into my fingers right through my buckskin gloves, but vainly shook it. Then I rushed at it, calling to her to hold my horse. The strong bars again vibrated a little, but that was all. Love and despair, however, made me reckless. I jumped violently on the top rail, and my thirteen stone at last brought it down, and myself too, into the ditch on the opposite side.

"Now," I said, scrambling out, "jump, Miss Chiltern, and ride on. My horse is beaten, let him go, he won't run far."

"No, indeed," she replied, "I shan't leave you after you have had all this trouble on my account. Come back and get on."

I crossed the fence again, but I was in a miserable condition.

My white nether garments had become piebald, my coat was torn, my hat crushed in, and my boots covered with mud. I got on my panting and bleeding steed, who evidently wanted to go home, and when, at last, we got over the fatal place which my weight had made easy enough, I again begged my fair companion to push on.

"You see," I explained, "this animal is a young horse, without either blood, training, or condition. He is done for to-day; in fact, I had no business to bring him out. Your mare is as fresh as paint. Besides, I'm in such an awful mess. Please go on; the next fence looks easy."

"I shall not go on without you," she answered. "It was the mare's fault as much as your horse's. If I go on by myself, I shall be pounded, but we can help each other if we are together. Never mind your mess."

This was pleasant and cheering, the only sweet drop in the bitter cup. We cantered on, as she restrained her impatient horse to keep pace with my weary one. My troubles were nearly over, if not hers; for we found a handy line of gates which at last brought us to a farm-yard. I had lost my bearings altogether, and so had she, for what with the morning's trot from cover to cover, and the last gallop, we had reached quite the other side of the country. Hope, however, told a flattering tale, till an inquiry as to which way the hounds had gone extinguished the last spark. The farmer's son had just arrived in his gig; they had passed him and crossed the road, a mile on our right, half-an-hour before. We had been wrong after all; we ought to have gone through the gate with the more cautious folk, instead of taking our own line.

"Well," said Miss Chiltern, "it's no use trying to catch them now." Nor did it seem of much use, for the youth explained that the fox looked like making for Brankstone Gorse, five miles off in the uplands, and that they were running hard. So we pulled up to a trot, but yet jogged on in the direction indicated. To tell the truth, I was less vexed than Miss Chiltern. She had lost the run, but I had gained what I had been vainly striving

for so long—a chance of a chat with her. My admiration had assumed a much warmer and more enthusiastic tinge since the morning: it had deepened and extended. For, until then, I had only been charmed by her beauty, her grace, and her hard riding; but she had since shown a kind heart and true lady-like feeling. If my brute had not persistently refused, I believe she could well have followed young Newton; but the sight of my horse's obstinacy had infected her mare, and I felt that I was the cause of her losing the run, particularly as she had refused to leave me. For a high-spirited girl like Kate Chiltern this was a severe trial on the last day of the season; yet she showed the most charming good humour, and quite fascinated me with her lively and pleasant talk. We chatted of horses and people, of Brighton, and of town; found that we had several mutual friends, and before we had covered many miles had become quite intimate. At last, reaching a cottage near Brankstone Gorse, we ascertained that, after dwelling there for a few minutes, the hounds had hurried the fox away again, and that for the last hour nothing had been seen of hounds or horsemen. We were fairly thrown out; the day was waning, and there was nothing left for it but to go home.

"Will not Mr. Chiltern be anxious about you?" I inquired.

"Papa? Oh, dear no!" she said, "we seldom ride home together. He does not care about jumping, and if there is a straight run and we get away, he just jogs on quietly. He knows that I can take care of myself, or," she added archly, "that I shall find some one to take care of me."

Now, Miss Chiltern lived near Stokington, while my stables were at the great railway junction of Blankborough, quite in a different direction. So after we had turned our horses' heads, she said, "Now, Mr. Wanderer," for of course I had told her my name, which, as I suspected, she had never heard, "just ride on to Blankborough. I shall not let you come a yard out of your way for me. I am quite used to going home alone."

Of course I absolutely declined this suggestion, and as she found that I was not to be persuaded, she at last gave up the

point. I procured for her some milk at a farm-house, and she shared her sandwiches with me, for mine had been lost in the scrimmage. It was sixteen miles to Stokington, and at every turning she wanted me to leave her. At last I inquired whether my company was disagreeable to her. "Not at all," she answered, frankly, "I am very glad of it. It is horribly dull riding all that way alone. But I am thinking of your poor horse and yourself. Of course, you must stop and dine with us. Mamma will be delighted to see you, and papa will try to make you comfortable. But I know you are wanting to change your things, and are disgusted at coming so far out of your way for the sake of a stupid girl."

Like Othello, on this hint, I spake. I assured her that I was not wishing myself at home at all, but, on the contrary, could desire nothing better than to ride sixteen or twenty miles with her. "I am sure your horse is not of your opinion," she remarked; and at last, when we were approaching her home, and the shades of evening were gathering around us, I even suggested that I should desire, above all things to ride through life with her by my side. She looked a little startled. "Yes," I added, warmly, "if you would consent to this, dearest Miss Chiltern (I did not quite dare to say 'Kate'), there would be no chance of my refusing fences. We should not get pounded, and I would lead the way over all obstacles. The run would be made easy for you: it should be all grass, with gates and gaps. And if there *were* a nasty post and rails in front, why I would break the top one for you, and not mind a few scratches. My love for you would carry me better than this brute of a horse, ('Hold up,' I had to exclaim, as the weary beast stumbled,) and yours, if you have any—may I hope you have?—better than even your beautiful mare."

"Don't you think," asked Miss Chiltern, as I paused for breath in my ecstatic discourse, "that you are rather hasty, Mr. Wanderer? I have really only had the pleasure of making your acquaintance to-day. Are you not a little premature?"

This was severe, but my ardour carried me away to renew

my protestations. "I can hardly consider you serious," she answered, "and after the trouble you have taken for me, I should not like to be rude. For the present, would it not be better to drop the subject?"

I did so, much against my will. Her smiles and her good-nature returned; I saw hope for the future. After all, it was not fair to expect a girl to accept a fellow after four hours' acquaintance. I was committing the error of riding too fast a a very enormous fence. Patience, I thought, for a few day only. And we rode into Mr. Chiltern's hospitable gates, when a neat groom at once took charge of our horses. The old coupl were excessively kind, and made me as comfortable as I possibl could be without my usual toilet requisites. I could not stay al night, but Mr. Chiltern insisted on keeping my horse, while he sent me over to the nearest railway station in his pony chaise to catch the last train. As he shook hands on the steps, "Good bye," he said, "we shall be very glad to see you again. There will be great doings here in May. You must come down from town; there'll be a bed for you, and you must stop the whole week."

My heart jumped within me. In six weeks it would be May, and I should be under the same roof as Kate for several days; and what a nice father-in-law old Chiltern would make. "With pleasure," I answered; "what will be going on?"

"Oh! don't you know?" replied Mr. Chiltern. "Kate is going to be married to young Newton. You must have met him in the hunting field. He is a son of my nearest neighbour and best friend. They have liked each other a long time, but they only settled it at Brighton a fortnight ago. He's a very good fellow; and Kate will live only six miles off. Good-bye: don forget the seventh of May!"

* * * * *

I did not go to Stokington on the seventh of May.

* * * * *

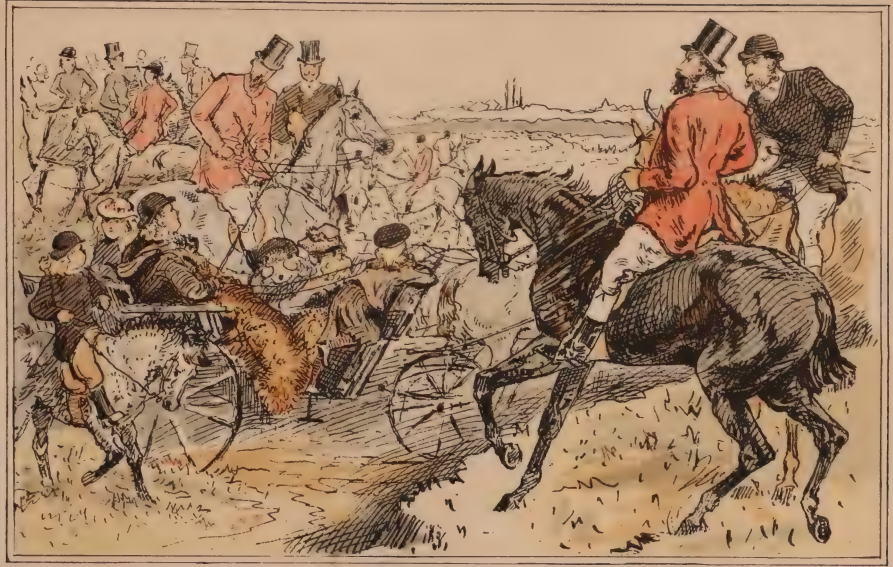
This happened several years ago, I won't say how many.

have not hunted with the Meadshire since. I have wandered about the world a good deal in the interval. But this March a friend offered me a mount: the meet was Stokington Gorse. There were as many squires, and farmers, and schoolboys, and London men as ever; the air was again bright and balmy; the hedges budding, and the birds twittering and fluttering.

There was a pony-carriage drawn up at the side of the cross-roads, full of children. In the back seat was a lady, rather inclined to *embonpoint*, with fair hair and dark eyebrows. A fine boy with the same dark eyes and still fairer hair was on a rough pony at the side of the chaise.

"Who is that lady?" I asked my friend.

"That fat woman with the enormous family? She's a Mrs. Newton—a local person. Used to ride hard when she was a young one, I believe. Come, let us jog on: the hounds are in cover."



"That fat woman with the enormous family."

SOME DEALERS.

EXCEPT money lenders, there is probably no class so much abused as horse-dealers, none which by the outside world is considered to deserve the abuse so thoroughly. It is a curious circumstance that while those who pursue money-lending as a respectable profession, and are content with legitimate gains, are called bankers, and are universally and deservedly looked up to, the genuine horse-dealer has no name by which he can be distinguished from the "coper." This latter expression is mere slang, and by no means accurately fits the more respectable members of a class which unfortunately suffers as a whole for the evil behaviour of a portion. For of course there are many thoroughly respectable and trustworthy dealers, to whom the following anecdotes do not apply.

There is nothing in the nature of that noble animal the horse which should make buying and selling him more demoralising than buying and selling cotton, tea, or shares; yet while the tea-merchant, the cotton-spinner, and the stockbroker are universally received, and no one—not even royalty itself—would

exclude them on account of their callings from the most select circles, the horse-dealer is almost invariably viewed in a very different light. It must be a most fascinating horse-dealer indeed who can overcome the obstacles which custom and the habits of certain of his colleagues have raised against his entrance into Society. The distinction between retail and wholesale is well known. If you sell a pound of screws you are vulgar and are not received anywhere, but if you sell screws by the hundredweight you may be—and, in fact, you are—a Cabinet Minister. In the matter of horses, however, this distinction does not apply. You cannot, as a rule, sell less than one horse, but though you sell hundreds their number is no qualification. Of course everyone knows that there are many gentlemen, retired cavalry officers, country squires with small incomes, and others, who occasionally make a few pounds by the purchase and sale of horses. It is evident therefore that the mere fact of doing so is not considered disgraceful. No one is obliged, if he wishes to dispose of a portion of his stud, to send them to Tattersall's or put them in the hands of an agent. He has a perfect right to sell them privately and to give himself much trouble in the operation. He may get the best prices he can, and is allowed to become more enthusiastic on the merits of a horse without thereby losing caste than a Birmingham hardware manufacturer would be permitted on the subject of his nails and screws. Of course, if he "lets a friend in" he incurs a certain amount of obloquy, as he would in any other doubtful transaction, though perhaps less than he would if he stuck his customer with short weight and inferior goods. It is clearly therefore not the act but the calling of horse-dealing which is considered almost a disgrace.

Whence does this fact arise? Is it more difficult to "size" piece goods, to adulterate tea, to "bull" stocks, than to "cope" a horse? Hardly. On the contrary, almost any fool can do the former, while it requires much experience and a certain amount of intelligence to get up a horse for sale successfully. Again, is it that fraud in commerce is less often detected? This cannot be the reason. It is easier to find out whether cotton has been

sold to you containing forty per cent. of clay than that you have been sold by a horse worth forty per cent. only of what you gave for it. And while the value of merchandise is generally well known and thoroughly established, quotations being printed and published from day to day, the value of horses is at most entirely personal. The Germans would call the former objective, the latter subjective. The value of drugs, pig-iron, or grain does not in the least depend upon the man who buys them ; the buyer can always sell them again at the market price of the day. But that of a horse is not thus established. If, requiring a brougham horse, and not requiring a hunter, you buy a fiery animal which you cannot drive and don't want to hunt, the horse is worth very much less to you than he is to your neighbour, who does *not* want a carriage horse, but *does* wish to follow hounds. He is of comparatively no value to you, but he may be worth much to him. The value therefore depends in this case upon the purchaser. Still more patent is the position of the breeder. A fine thoroughbred mare who has not a leg to stand upon may be worth a couple of hundred or more to him ; to the Londoner who wants a safe hack she is absolutely without value at all. The great question is therefore to discover the man who requires the article which you want to get rid of. Several modes are possible to effect this object. There are, of course, our horse repositories ; there is the horse-dealer ; and there is, thirdly, the vehicle of publicity, or, in other words, advertising.

Almost every number of the cheaper daily papers (and some of the more expensive ones also) contains several advertisements of horses for sale. Many are announced as "the property of an officer going abroad." Others are stated to belong to a "lady." In other cases, again, the intending purchaser is told to apply to "coachman" at No. 100, X Mews, near a fashionable square, and is thus led to suppose that the animals in question stand in the stables of a nobleman.

The novice may be told that, as a rule, respectable dealers do not advertise in the daily papers, certain special sales and extraordinary occasions being of course excepted. It is unusual,

also, for private individuals to use these papers for the purpose of disposing of good horses. They, like the legitimate horse-dealers, know well that they are not likely to find good purchasers for their animals by this means, for their advertisements appear in such bad company. The chaunters (as I will call them for want of a better word) so habitually use the columns of the cheaper dailies for their fictitious and fraudulent announcements that honest people confine themselves to the weekly agricultural and sporting papers, where the scamps do *not* advertise. It will at once be asked why the latter do not, as a rule, contribute anything to the advertisement returns of the legitimate organs of racing, driving, and hunting. Simply because they know that the majority of the readers of these papers will not be taken in by their specious puffs. They prefer appealing to the general public, the majority of whom are of course ignorant of the art of buying and selling horses. In the mass of readers of a political daily they hope to catch one or two greenhorns, and from the regularity with which their advertisements appear it would seem that they calculate rightly.

An attentive reader of the corners in which these announcements are generally placed cannot fail to discover that certain addresses recur with extraordinary frequency. "A lady" has a favourite park hack for sale; price is no object, her principal aim being to find a kind master for her old friend. The animal is to be seen at No. 101, Y-street, S.W. Two days later an officer, suddenly ordered to India, has a wonderful charger to sell; either the officer is related to the lady, or they possess joint stables, for we are again referred to No. 101, Y-street, S.W. On the following Monday there is a trotting pony, with village cart, the property of a clergyman, to be seen and sold at the same place. "The pony is a perfect dray horse in miniature, trots sixteen miles within the hour; the cart is by So-and-so, &c., &c." A magnificent pair of barouche horses next occupies these stables, and, with a few variations, the series then begins once more. Where these horses come from, and who buys them, is a mystery I cannot pretend to explain. I can,

however, give two examples of what a curious visitor is likely to find if he goes to the address stated, and I will first mention the case of a park hack and good hunter, advertised as the property of a lady who was no longer able to ride. A friend of mine, no great *connoisseur* in horseflesh, was looking out for an animal to suit his wife, and to carry him occasionally in the park. He noticed the advertisement, and went to the mews in question, in a very fashionable neighbourhood. The mare appeared to suit him exactly, and the "coachman" was so specious that my friend very nearly bought her on the spot for the price asked—forty guineas only. However, being a shrewd City man, and therefore well aware of his own want of knowledge in horsey matters, he did not absolutely close, but promised to send a friend next morning, and to buy the animal for the price asked if this friend should be satisfied as to soundness. I was rather surprised when, during my favourite before-dinner rubber at the club, a card was brought to me on the back of which was pencilled, "I should like to see you on a matter of importance. Will not keep you five minutes." It was my City friend, and he proceeded at once to ask me to have a look at the horse early in the morning. "I think it is a swindle," I said, having heard his story, "but I will look at the beast some time to-morrow." "But you must go early," my friend urged, "otherwise she will be sold. Fancy getting a handsome ladies' hack, sound in every respect, for the ridiculously small figure of £42. She will be snapped up instantly if *I* don't buy her." I had my doubts about this "snapping up," and did not believe that there were, as my friend said, several eager buyers anxious to possess the paragon. However, to satisfy him, I promised to be at the mews at nine o'clock next morning. I kept my word, and found the would-be purchaser already there. I said: "Do me the favour of going away, I can get on better without you. You may come back in a quarter of an hour." Very reluctantly he obeyed. The wonder was brought out—a light and rather leggy chestnut, about 15 hands 1 inch, decidedly good-looking, and with signs of high breeding. Beyond a few windgalls I

could detect nothing suspicious about her legs; her eyes looked older than her mouth (not an unusual circumstance), but altogether she appeared just the animal for the purpose intended. She was shown by a very talkative individual in a smart stable-jacket, who pretended to be the groom of the lady "about to go abroad." Though I attempted to discover this lady's name and address, I failed to get any other reply than that she was visiting in Ireland. After a few minutes the groom became confidential. "You're a gent as knows all about 'osses, I can see with 'alf an eye, sir," he remarked, to lull my suspicions. "Well, I won't try to deceive you; it ain't no use. My lady, she says to me, she says, 'we don't want the mare, Smith, you may sell her for thirty-five sovereigns.' There never was a better mare foaled, and she's worth a hundred if she's worth anything; but my lady ain't got no use for her. I'm a poor man, sir, and I don't see why I shouldn't get a trifle by her. So-ho! steady, lass," he said, as he stroked her neck. "So I asked your friend forty guineas. The seven pounds would be for me, sir. You wouldn't grudge a poor fellow a few quid, would you? I'm bound to give my lady thirty-five, and no more. I won't deceive you; so if you likes to give me forty sovereigns down, why take her away."

All this appeared to me neither logical nor to the purpose. I was anxious to discover the faults of the mare, and instead of this was entertained with the (fictitious) history of the man.

"Can I have her examined?" I asked.

"Of course you can, sir, only you'd best be sharp about it. There's several after her. Why, there's Lord B——'s coachman, he told me not five minutes ago that she'd just suit her ladyship, and——"

But I will spare the reader the man's long-winded story, the gist of which was that at least one nobleman, two officers, and three private gentlemen were ready to buy the mare there and then for their respective wives, sweethearts, or sisters, and that he had only *not* yet sold her because he had promised my friend to wait for this morning's visit. I felt that if I proposed sending

a vet the mare would probably be removed before he arrived—possibly, nay probably, simply to avoid any examination, but professedly as having been sold. In such a case I thought my friend would never forgive me my caution. Probably my doubts were patent on my face, for the groom proposed to fetch the mare's certificate: she had, he said, been examined a few days before. He produced a document in excellent form, testifying that the writer had examined a chestnut mare, "Peggy," and had passed her sound. This paper was signed by one of the best names in the College, nor could there be any doubt as to the authenticity of the signature. My readers will consider I was pushing caution to excess when I admit that I was not yet entirely satisfied.

"Very well," I said; "we will take the mare if she hacks well. Just have a saddle put on her back, I'll walk her round the square."

The man looked a little disquieted, but did not dare to refuse.

"Don't take her far, sir! I expect Lord B—— every minute," he remarked, when, after a great deal of unnecessary delay, I was at last on her back. I walked her down the mews and round the square, and then took her at a trot towards the park, which was barely four hundred yards off. There was a queer little noise. Was it in my ears? Was anything wrong with my tympanum? The next few minutes settled the question. A sharp canter from Grosvenor Gate to Hyde Park Corner; and though the distance was short, the result was decisive. The mare was a confirmed roarer; so bad a one that she was not even fit for a cab. Though I walked her quite quietly back to the stable, her flanks were still heaving when she reached it. My friend was talking to the groom; the latter came forward.

"You've given her a bucketing," he exclaimed; "you ain't got no business to gallop another man's horse about like that."

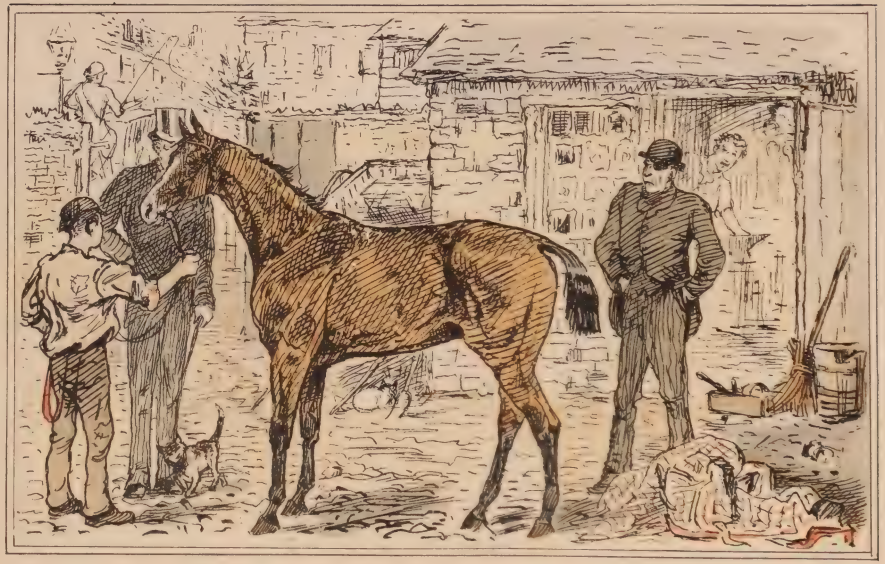
"You had better not be cheeky," I answered, taking my friend's arm; "the mare is a bad roarer, and you know it."

A few oaths accompanied us down the mews, but they did not hurt.

Now, I shall be asked, how it was that the veterinary certificate

was so satisfactory? The answer is simple enough. The signature was genuine, and the chestnut mare which Mr. G—— had examined was undoubtedly sound. *But it was not the same chestnut mare.* The dealer, or whatever the gentleman called himself, probably kept several good certificates of genuine horses on stock, and showed the one which best suited the animal he was about to sell.

The above was a comparatively simple case, and there was really no difficulty in detecting the fraud. Only a greenhorn could have been taken in. I have another to relate, however, in which still greater drafts were made on the credulity of the purchaser, and, as it seems, with constant success. One winter, about Christmas time, I was short of horses. The season had been very open, and what with the Devon and Somerset Stag-hounds, cub-hunting, and a few hard days in the Vale, I had pretty well run through my stud. One morning I noticed in one of the most widely-circulated dailies an advertisement of a bay mare for sale, cheap, 15-3, perfectly sound, and an excellent huntress. She was to be seen at a stable in the N.W. postal district. Having nothing particular to do on that afternoon I thought I would just have a look at the animal, not with any real hopes of a bargain, but as much from curiosity as from any other motive. Accordingly, having chartered a hansom I drove to the somewhat remote address given. It was a small and exceedingly dirty stable-yard: in one corner was a small forge, at which an apprentice was hammering out a shoe; there was no one else about. Having inquired whether a hunting mare was for sale here, the apprentice answered by calling out for Jack, and Jack appeared, a disreputable-looking helper, as dirty as the yard. He led me to a dark and dingy stable, where, in the darkest and dingiest corner, stood the mare in question. It was impossible to see her at all. I requested the man to bring her out. He did so, and brought her into the only available open space, which was about six feet broad. On my request he also removed her very seedy clothes. She certainly looked very handsome. A small head set on a lean neck, a long body, sloping shoulders, fine powerful quarters, short



"You can ride her up and down the road."

legs, good hocks. If her appearance had any fault at all, it was only on the right side. She might be called somewhat cobby, and was not fifteen three, or anything like it. I proceeded to measure her with a sliding stick I possessed for the purpose, and just as I was doing so a most villainous-looking individual, with one shoulder higher than the other, a red nose, and a black patch over one eye, came up.

"What are you doing to the mare?" he called out rudely.

"This is the governor," explained Jack. "He is a measuring of her."

"I find she is only 15-1," I remarked mildly.

"Then I'm a liar," said the governor. "Take her in, Jack; she's too small for the gentleman, though she *has* carried sixteen stone for two seasons."

"I did not say you were a liar," I answered, "and if you want to sell the mare, you had better let me look at her. What is her figure?"

"Forty pound," answered the "governor" in a surly tone. "She's as good a hunter as ever was foaled, and worth four times the money. There's a lot of gentlemen after her now."

As there always *are* a number of purchasers after every horse one takes a fancy to, this information did not disturb me much. Continuing my inspection, I was still at a loss to find any fault with the mare. At the price she certainly appeared to me a most extraordinary bargain. Her appearance was so prepossessing that she looked worth more than the amount merely to run in harness.

"I should like to get on her back," I remarked, "and try over a couple of hurdles."

"You can ride her up and down the road," was the sulky reply; "but there ain't no hurdles about here, and I won't have that mare bucketted about all over the place and then sent back."

"Well," I answered, "it is not far to Cricklewood, and you can come yourself to see that she is not badly used. We can put her over a few fences there, and that will do for me."

"If she ain't good enough to take at forty pound she ain't worth sixpence. There's two gentlemen ready to give me the money at once; I believe one on 'em 'll fetch her away this afternoon, and I ain't going to tire *her* to please *you*."

Finding the man absolutely impracticable, I closed the matter by saying, "You cannot expect me to buy a horse without some sort of trial."

"There's plenty who will at the price," interposed he.

"Perhaps so," I continued; "but that's not the way I buy horses. Here's my card; if the intending purchaser fails, and you are willing to grant a fair trial—an hour is ample—let me know. Only I shan't come here again. You will have to send the mare down to my place; I will take her round my paddock, and over a couple of fences I have put up there. If she goes well your man can take forty sovs back; if not, there's no harm done."

"The governor" looked at the card contemptuously. "Willesden?" he asked, satirically, having noticed the address. "Do you think I shall send her all the way to Willesden to get forty pound for her? I'd sooner give her away!" and he tore the card in two, and threw the pieces on the ground. Of course I walked out of the yard, got into my cab, and regretted having wasted the best part of an afternoon. Now what could be the reason of this behaviour? I asked myself the question more than once. The man talked in a tone calculated to frighten away even the most eager customer. There was no smooth tongue, no insinuating manner. He looked the ruffian, and he spoke like one. He refused with insolence the sort of information which would be gladly vouchsafed even at a public auction, where no guarantee is asked and none is given. In short, I wondered how such a man could ever sell a horse at all; yet that he did so was evident, for scanning the advertisement columns of a certain daily paper with more attention than usual, I found that scarcely a day passed without some horse or other being announced for sale at this man's stables. Of what calibre could his victims be? Nay more, I may still ask, "of what

calibre are they?" for his advertisement is now before me in this morning's paper. The incident related occurred more than two years ago; for two years, therefore, this man has been able to make a fair (?) trade in the way described. A man who would be bullied into buying a horse without trial and without examination by a coarse ruffian such as this one must be an arrant fool, and it is hardly credible that there should be sufficient arrant fools in the world to keep a "coper" of this class going. Yet there must be many, and I fear that they are too stupid to take a friendly warning, even if they should read these lines.

Less dangerous, though occasionally very plausible, is the man who hangs about auction sales, on the look out for a victim. This individual generally drives up in a smartish gig or dog-cart, which he leaves at the gate in charge of a handy man. He then thrusts himself well into the crowd who surround the auctioneer's desk, and watches. He soon "spots" a gentleman, who has just failed in securing a horse he has been bidding for. The gentleman is then gently nudged, and coper, begging his pardon, inquires whether "he bought that 'oss?"

"No," says the victim.

"Bid forty-six, though, didn't you, sir?"

"Yes," replies the gentleman.

"A deal too much, too, sir, begging your pardon." (This class of coper is always very civil and apologetic.) "Now, sir, I can show you an 'oss worth two of that last one, and you can have him for thirty pound. Warranted too, sir. He's only a step outside. Suit a gentleman like you, sir, as can ride. Quiet in harness, and good over any country."

And so on, and so on. An extraordinary catalogue of virtues is recounted, and the dealer swears that such a horse could not be found in a twelvemonth; that he is only obliged to sell him through misfortunes; that his wife (the missus) loves the horse as the apple of her eye, and that he'll catch it when he gets home if he has sold him. If the victim listens, the coper "piles it on" with an audacity and a fluency which would

deceive any one not used to the tricks of the trade, and he frequently succeeds in walking triumphantly out of the yard with the novice in tow. He leads him up to the dog-cart, offers to drive him (he generally says, "Ave a ride, sir—sit behind him"), and confidingly tenders the ribbons to his companion. The horse goes well enough, and appears sound; besides, the victim is assured that the horse will be taken back, and the money returned, if the horse does not suit. Need we add the sequel? The horse is purchased, is stone blind, or broken winded, and the seller is utterly unknown at the address given.

The sum of the experiences one may thus gather is, that respectable dealers do not as a rule advertise in the cheap daily papers, and that such advertisements are therefore generally traps to catch the unwary; further, that "copers" do not advertise in the respectable weeklies devoted to sport and country pursuits, because, in the first place, the readers of these papers generally know a horse from a cow, and, in the second, because the managers and editors, who are of course specially trained in such matters, are able to exercise a judicious process of selection, and to refuse certain advertisements.

OUR AMERICAN COUSIN.

SHOOTING trips to the Rocky Mountains and expeditions to the Far West have of late years become very common among the more enthusiastic of English sportsmen, and so many parties are annually organised to cross the herring-pond and hunt the big game still to be found on the American prairies that Englishmen are, so report says, more destructive to wild beasts than the contingent of native-born sportsmen. Less numerous are the Americans who come to England to share in our Old World sports. Hunting the carted deer must needs appear tame to one who has first run down and then shot the bison, while the risks of following the harriers can scarcely have much attraction for men who have had to strain every faculty in order to escape the deadly hug of the grizzly. Still, some Americans *do* come to England to drive four-in-hands, to ride in the Row, and to see how we get across the Shires. They belong, of course, to the class who have time and money at their disposal. They are quite

unlike the American traveller one meets at every step on the Continent. There is in them no trace of that feverish anxiety to see and do the most in the least possible time and at the smallest possible expense; none of that perpetual and unceasing grumbling at the accommodation and fare of the European hotels, which used formerly to be the privilege of English people, but is now almost monopolised by our cousins. The American who comes over to spend his money in sporting circles is always ready to do so with a lavishness not quite usual even amongst the most wealthy of our own people. I will not speak of Mr. James Gordon Bennett, who has for several years past almost identified himself with England in many ways, and whose home is now on this side of the Atlantic, if not on this side of the Channel. It is not everyone who can give seven hundred and fifty guineas for a park hack, nor five hundred for a perfect hunter. Mr. Bennett is now M.F.H., and is fully qualified for the post he has generously and kindly undertaken. My concern is rather with those young men, more numerous yearly, who have eighteen months or so to idle away, and ample, if not princely, funds at their disposal, and who, having heard and read that hunting is the amusement dearest to a true Englishman's heart, are anxious to go through with it for at least one complete season, so as to find out how they like it, and of what sort of stuff we of the old country are made. Several of our best hunting countries have been visited by one or other of these youngsters, and the impression they have made is, perhaps, worth recording, for the novelist may note the personages who pass over his stage, even though their appearance on it be short, and the effects produced comparatively unimportant.

My first acquaintance with Mr. Duffage C. Clarkson was with one of the more fashionable packs hunting within a hundred miles of London. Among the numerous men dressed in regulation costume who were waiting on the —— platform for the departure of the special to Starboro' I noticed one figure which was strange to me. It was that of a man of medium size, rather inclined to *embonpoint*, though not yet fat, with a face smooth

shaven and but a small moustache, and a long ulster buttoned down to his spurs, which were remarkable because they were strapped on the wrong way—the buckles inside and the rowels up. This gentleman was attended by another gentleman, whom I only recognised as his valet just as we were about to start. The valet carried a rug and a small portmanteau, which he pushed into the carriage after his master, and various other little articles of comfort, such as a long hunting-flask, a bundle of newspapers, a sandwich-case, &c., &c. As I was naturally rather curious about a man who wore his spurs the wrong way up, I got into the same carriage, and my curiosity promised to be very soon gratified, as the stranger entered into conversation almost before the train had cleared the terminus. The commencement of his talk was sufficiently urbane to prepossess all but the veriest curmudgeon in his favour, for, lighting an enormous cigar, he offered me its brother out of his own case, and therefore clearly did not belong to that not uncommon set who keep a few choice cigars for their own smoking in one case, and a lot of cabbage-leaves in another for their friends.

"Don't smoke?" asked my fellow traveller, briefly, when I declined his offer with thanks.

"Well," I replied, "the fact is that my nerves are not quite so good as they were; and though I do not mind a cigarette or two before hunting, I should be rather afraid of tackling that big weed of yours."

"Strange, this hunting," my new friend remarked, musingly; "you English seem to think a great deal of it, and you make more fuss about it than we do when we go for a hunting tour on the prairies. I wonder what it's like?"

Thus encouraged, of course I launched into a eulogy of the noblest pastime in the world with a fervour which might seem incomprehensible to all but fellow-sportsmen. That my *vis-à-vis* was an American I had guessed as soon as he opened his mouth; nor did he make the slightest secret of his nationality. He was most communicative, and informed me without the slightest reserve that he had come over to England with the intention of

mixing in the best society, that he had brought letters of introduction to various people, and that he intended to go in for everything; and that after pigeon-shooting at Hurlingham, lawn-tennis at the Orleans, racing at Doncaster and Newmarket, he had made up his mind to try hunting as well. Two friends, he told me, had suggested Starboro' as a good centre from which to make a beginning, but both had unfortunately been prevented from keeping their appointment that morning, so that he was thrown on his own resources. He had no one to give him advice, he continued, and would be glad if I would answer his questions. Of course I expressed myself delighted to be of use to a stranger.

"Well," he said, "that's what I call real good. I have always found you English real kind when you know a man. But you *air* rather stiff at first, you air. Now ain't you? My name is Duffage C. Clarkson. Here's my card. What's yours?"

I handed him my pasteboard, which compared most unfavourably as regards size with his own. He glanced at it for a moment. "Well," he remarked, quite unconcernedly, "I thought you were an Earl at least by your rig-out. Never mind, I dare say you are as good as one, anyway. Have a drink?"

This, in order not to offend, I accepted by taking the very smallest sip from his handsome flask. In the run to Starboro' I ascertained that Mr. Duffage C. Clarkson had taken chambers near St. James's Street; had been admitted to the somewhat exclusive club of the same name; had spent a good deal of money; and had, in short, done all that was possible to realise his ambition—that of living for a year with the *jeunesse dorée* of England, and doing as they did. He told me of his "hunting" adventures in the Far West, and then of his "hunting" pheasants in Kent, and pulled himself up while describing the latter by a remark that he always made mistakes between shooting and hunting. "We call everything hunting at home," he explained. "How are you off for horses?" I inquired, thinking, perhaps, of an old steed in my stable, quiet as a lamb,

cunning as an old fox, handy as a knife and fork, but blessed with only two legs and a half. Such an animal, I felt at once, would be absolutely invaluable to a stranger. "You ought to have a clever hunter," I continued.

"Well, Mr. 'Wanderer,' I guess I ought to have one. I have got six at Starboro'—a cheap lot I bought last week at Tattersall's. A friend of mine helped me, and I bought the whole stud right away. They belonged to Viscount Alderney" (I noticed that my friend was careful to give every member of the nobility his exact title), "and I reckon they can go."

I was amazed. The horses Mr. Clarkson mentioned had fetched very high figures, none less than a hundred and fifty, and some much more. The man must be a Crœsus, I thought. What a pity I did not meet him last week! Old Patrick (the two-and-a-half-legged one) would have suited him exactly, and he might have taken the little mare into the bargain, both for a hundred. Such, however, has always been my fate. I have invariably missed every opportunity of buying cheap, and been too late for every chance of selling dear. So, being pretty well accustomed to my bad luck, I listened with patience, and not without interest, to various tales of bear hunts and of bison-stalking in America. As we approached Starboro', however, I took heart of grace. "May I give you a slight hint?" I inquired. "Certainly, stranger; spit it out," was my American friend's emphatic rejoinder.

"Well," I went on, rather timidly, "do they always wear spurs that way in America?" He looked at them.

"The fact is," he answered, "I thought they were such darned rubbishy fixings that I did not quite know how to put them on; but I reckoned they would fetch up the horse a bit quicker that way than the other. You should see the spurs *we* wear. Why they're twice as long and as thick as your thumb. These things are no manner of use except to tickle a horse's hide. Thank you, though, all the same; I like to know how you do things in the old country." And suiting the action to the word, he proceeded, under my guidance, to change the

spurs, an operation which was barely concluded when we ran alongside the Starboro' platform.

My old horse, Patrick, the very one to suit Mr. Clarkson, was waiting at the station, and as I knew he did not like being hammered fast along the road, I started at once for the meet: while my friend, who was received, I thought, rather superciliously, by a most elegant groom, drove off to the Green Dragon in a fly. I had ample time to get over the four miles, and just before reaching the trysting-place, I was passed by Mr. Clarkson on a handsome chestnut, whom he was galloping along the road with a loose rein. On one side of him was a well-known sporting (and, if report speaks true, book-making) publican: on the other a dealer whose doings have not always been quite so straight as they should be. "I wonder if that is what he calls 'good society,'" was my thought as he passed me, chatting with his friends and giving me a pleasant bow. However, I had not long to think, as the hounds had already arrived, and the morning being rather cold they moved off pretty quickly. I lost sight of the American in the crowd, and it was some time before I came across him again. Old Pat was as keen as mustard, and I jumped into the first coverts drawn just to please him. It was some time before a fox was found, and still longer before he got away. When at last the welcome "Forrard away" resounded I was on the wrong side of the wood, and had to work pretty hard to get on terms with the rest of the field. Patrick was clever, as I have said, but, to use a Yorkshire expression, "he was as slow as a man," and it took a lot of doing to bring him up with the main body without blowing him at the start. At last, however, thanks to a narrow hunting-gate which checked the eager stream of horsemen who were unwilling to negotiate the very awkward-looking double on its right, I managed to secure a decent place, for the obstacle just suited my old steed, who forced his way through it with a creep, a jump, and a hop worthy of his best days. I now had time to look about me and see what was going on. In a moment I descried my American friend wide on the right and rather in front of me. His horse

was going with his nose up, evidently doing exactly as *he* pleased. The rider was clinging manfully to his saddle in a curious manner, and one which I had never before seen, for he was evidently quite cool and collected, nor was he at all inclined to lose his balance. He simply did not know what to do. He would, I think, have preferred to wait and see what others did, but this the horse would not permit. Mr. Clarkson, however, had no notion of guiding nor even of holding him; he was merely sitting down and trusting in Providence. To have given advice at the pace we were going would have been ridiculous; besides, I might have upset the American's admirable balance. We were approaching a very black oxer, thorny and threatening. There was one nice convenient gap, towards which old Patrick was steering, almost without my intervention; the American, however, kept straight on, pointing for the very thickest part. His horse was much faster than mine, and jumped into the mass of thorns just as Patrick was steadying himself for the little jump before him, which had already been successfully crossed and made easier by all the leaders. When I got the other side it scarcely surprised me to see a riderless chestnut careering over the plough, while Mr. Clarkson was violently hitting the inside of his hat to restore that object to its normal shape, and then proceeding to wipe his face, which was all torn and bleeding. The dealer, who had jumped the gap before me, caught the chestnut, while the publican pulled up to help the stranger, so as there was no occasion for my services I pushed on. I could not afford to waste much time, as my horse was quite unable to make up lost ground. I knew it was a far cry to Holden Wood, for which Reynard appeared to be pointing. The next few fences were very small, and after crossing them we reached a large meadow, fringed on the lower side by the notorious Blackwater, one of the nastiest brooks in the Starboro' country. On the far side the ground rose gently to the hills in the distance which were covered by Holden Woods. If the fox crossed Blackwater he was sure to make for this refuge, but, as he was hard pressed, it was just possible that he might dodge along the

brook, hoping to baffle the hounds, and run for some osier beds about half a mile up the stream. The leaders, the boldest of whom would have just as soon left Blackwater alone, were drawing rein in the meadow, and watching the hounds, just as I crossed the last little fence. As I was doing likewise the chestnut rushed past on my right, his rider having landed somewhere on the horse's neck at the fence just crossed. Away he went, straight for the brook, and fortunately escaped by a hair's-breadth a volley of strong language from all concerned, for at the same moment the hounds plunged into the water, and streamed away in full cry on the other side. The nearest to them was the chestnut, and the American made no attempt whatever to stop him, but sat quite quiet, and let his horse go as he listed. Unwilling as most Englishmen are to be beaten on their own ground by a stranger, I felt no inclination to follow, but turning old Patrick to the left, trotted off to a place where the stream was fordable to a clever horse, who had the intelligence and patience to slide down the bank sideways and scramble up the other side without being flustered. I could trust my screw quite sufficiently to have an eye to the Yankee. His horse approached Blackwater at great speed, and gave a tremendous bound. Mr. Clarkson flew out of the saddle, describing a parabola in the air, and fell on his back fairly clear of the bank into the soft grass. The horse, after a "peck" and a struggle, slid back into the water, just as his owner was getting on his legs again, apparently unhurt. A few men, having got across or through, caught the horse and led him to the ford, where he got out easily, while I rode along the bank to look after Mr. Clarkson. He only remarked that he was all right, and that I must not wait for him, thanked those who had caught his horse, and remounted quite unconcernedly. Before we reached the next fence he was alongside of me again. Again he jumped it with a loose rein, and without apparently getting any grip at all, for once more he landed almost on his horse's head, and had to struggle back to the saddle. He was, however, nearly at the end of his troubles, for the hounds ran into their fox three fields short of the big woods, and pulled

"Again he landed almost on his horse's neck."

him down in a ploughed field. Clarkson rode up to me as if nothing at all unusual had occurred. "I should like the fox's tail," he said; "do you think I could get it if I gave the man with the horn ten pounds?"

I was perfectly appalled. "For goodness sake!" I exclaimed, "don't spoil old Starling by giving him tenners. He would never touch his cap to us poor devils again. A sovereign is plenty; and you must not talk of a fox's tail. It is a brush." "All right, stranger," answered the Yankee, and he trotted off to negotiate with Starling. Patrick, however, had had quite enough of it. He had done well for his age, which I believe was nearer twenty than ten; and I at once gave up any chance of an afternoon fox, and jogged quietly towards Starboro', which was at least twelve miles off. Having dismounted at the Green Dragon, I saw my horse made comfortable with gruel and rugs, and then leisurely proceeded to attend to my own comforts. When I descended to the hunt-room after copious ablutions and a complete change of dress, I found Mr. Clarkson, who had just returned, in the act of giving his orders to the attentive but astonished waiter. My friend was splashed all over, his coat plastered with mud, his face covered with scratches; one coat-tail was torn, and one spur had disappeared. His battered hat was on the table beside him, but he held his crop in his hand, and proceeded to count the persons assembled by pointing at them with it. "Three, four, five, six," he said. "Ah! and here is my friend 'Wanderer.' I guess half-a-dozen will about fix it. Half-a-dozen, waiter," he repeated. Thinking he was talking of beer or shandy-gaff, I did not interfere, but shook him by the hand, congratulating him on his plucky riding. "Plucky?" he said, inquiringly. "No, stranger, *I* don't call that plucky. I just wanted to find out what hunting was like, and I think I hev. But now have some drink."

The waiter reappeared with—half-a-dozen bottles of champagne. Mr. Clarkson called for pewters, and emptying the best part of a bottle into each, pressed them on all present. I cannot drink champagne "out of a moog," particularly on an empty stomach.

I can do a good deal in that way, but one must draw the line somewhere. I therefore firmly declined, at the risk of offending my new friend. Finding me and one or two more obdurate, he at last emptied my pewter as well as his own, and retired to dress, while I partook of a sober tea.

The sequel, however, remains to be told. On the return journey we again occupied the same compartment, and this time two others accompanied us. In a few minutes one of them remarked that there was a very peculiar smell in the carriage, and shortly the other man and myself also perceived it.

"What on earth is the reason of this horrible stench?" we cried at last, quite driven to despair in our vain efforts to trace the cause.

"Perhaps it's the fox," calmly remarked Clarkson.

"What fox? Where?" we asked.

"There," he answered, pointing to his little portmanteau in the rack. "I gave the man with the horn a fiver, and he let me take the fox's tail—brush, I mean—and his feet, and his head, and I've packed them up to take them home to Philadelphia. I'll have them pickled when I get to London."

Nothing would induce him to give up his trophies, and as there was no stoppage *en route*, we smoked his cigars vigorously to stifle the scent.

As we shook hands on the platform Clarkson remarked, in answer to my parting question—

"Yes, I like your hunting very much, but I guess it's a little dangerous, and it's very expensive. But I won't tumble off next time quite so often."

Nor did he. I met him often afterwards, and a pluckier rider never was seen. But before his judgment had matured, and before he had found out the mistake of standing half-dozens of champagne after every run, he had to re-cross the herring-pond, and is now probably driving a spider-like vehicle a mile in two-twenty.

ILKA.

A HUNGARIAN TALE.

I.

THE south-east of Hungary, which forms the ancient kingdom of Transylvania, consists of fertile valleys separated from each other by mountain ranges of varying height. The slopes of these mountains are covered with dense forest, and, except on the southern frontier, where their height exceeds 8,000 feet, the trees extend almost to the summits. Deep chasms occasionally cleave them, down which run tiny rills in late summer and autumn, and roaring torrents in spring. Along the banks of these streams are strips of arable land, alternating with rich meadows, and here and there a tiny hamlet nestles among the poplars and willows which fringe them. The woods consist of dense underwood, of oak, hazel, and Spanish chestnut, with a few tall oaks

dotted about, and merging gradually as one ascends into beech, birch, and fir. These extensive forests are said to be inhabited by many wild animals, and the devastation committed in the poultry yards by the foxes, and among the flocks of sheep by the wolves and bears, are sufficient proof of the existence of big game. Hares, too, are frequently shot by the Wallach peasants, when they emerge from the woods into the Indian corn stubble, and woodcock may be purchased in their season for about a shilling a brace. It is a wild and weird country—a portion of Hungary which calls itself civilised; but ten years ago, when I lived there for some time, it was virtually lawless, and entirely subject to the good will of the large Hungarian landowners. Though these gentlemen do not really hold more than a third of the acreage under cultivation, they possess large tracts of forest, and the traditions of the period before 1848, when the small peasants, who now possess their own land, were serfs on the Hungarian estates, still give the nobles a certain halo of ancestral power which seems to affect the lower classes to so great an extent that they never claim the rights which the Constitution gives them. No peasant would think of complaining to the district judge of any injury the neighbouring Baron or Count might have inflicted on him; none would ever oppose the nobleman's will, however much a passing fancy might interfere with his domestic happiness. I have myself seen a Hungarian magnate, one of the best educated and most liberal of all the Transylvanian nobility, jump his horse from the stubble straight into the garden of a Wallach peasant, gallop across the vegetable beds, and trample down the few plants the poor man had been cultivating with sedulous care for the winter. Issuing by the gate on the other side he would canter along unconcernedly, quite unconscious of having inflicted any injury, and indolently return, by a slight inclination of his proud head, the humble salutation of the peasant-proprietor. Something of this is no doubt attributable to the difference of race—for the great majority of the agricultural population are either Wallachs or Saxons: the former as idle, drunken, cowardly, dirty, and im-

moral, as their brothers on the south side of the Carpathians; the latter, economical, sober, prudent, and humble, feeling themselves settlers in a strange land, though they have been there five centuries. The bench is generally occupied by the poorer scions of the Hungarian nobility, who, I regret to say, are as accessible to bribes as the few Saxons or Wallachs occasionally promoted to the office. Appeals can, of course, be made to the High Court, at Koloszvar, the capital, and thence to the Highest Court at Pest, but the former consists entirely of Hungarian nobles, and is extremely unlikely to reverse the sentence of the Court below. And as no appeal is allowed to the Highest Court if the two inferior ones agree in their judgment, it is very unusual for any complaint ever to reach Pest, and virtually the magnates may, except in the Saxon cities, do precisely as they please.

As, from the very earliest days of my residence in this country, I had placed myself on the best footing with the hospitable Hungarian nobles, I found it a not unpleasant one to live in. The climate was, it is true, atrocious, being excessively hot in summer, and as cold as Moscow in winter, when occasional sudden thaws sometimes caused a state of blockade during which, the roads being impassable, every hamlet was thrown on its own resources. Sport was of course the first matter I thought of when once the business which had taken me to Transylvania was attended to, and sport I was promised in great variety. The woods were full of game, said my friends, and the ravages already mentioned, besides the frequent appearance of sylvan delicacies at table, showed the assertion to be correct. I was burning with anxiety to try my new Purday central-fire (a style of gun which, at that period, had only just been introduced) on the winged denizens of the forest, while I reserved a double-barrelled "Express" for the larger animals. Although I scarcely ever sallied forth to my work without the fowling-piece, I had seen nothing but an occasional woodcock, which, with my habitual skill, I had invariably missed. In May I had, indeed, bagged a few quails in the green wheat, but beyond this, nothing had fallen to

my gun. When, therefore, a regular shooting party was at last, in November, proposed by Count Barczy, who resided about twelve miles from my station, I gladly accepted the suggestion. It was arranged that I was to drive over there on the Saturday, that we were to shoot on the Sunday in the neighbourhood of his place, and to return there at night; and that on Monday we were to beat towards my home, my horses and servants being directed to meet me half-way, for I was bound to be back again by the evening.

In order that my reader may understand what follows, it is necessary that I should briefly describe the geography of the district. My station was on the main road, a very fair one, which ran parallel to an important river. The valley of this river was the line of the future railway, on the survey of which I was supposed to be engaged. Within a few hundred yards of my home (an old Hungarian manorial residence) another stream, which we will call the Szeben, ran into the river from the high mountains: and up the Szeben there was also a high road, so that I was, in fact, stationed at the junction of two rivers and two roads. The one leading up the valley of the Szeben took to the nearest railway station about twenty-four miles off, but although this station was, as the crow flies, the nearest, the road across the mountain was so steep, so bad, and so frequently blocked, that the majority of persons preferred using the one *down* the main valley. By this route the railway was nearly thirty miles off, but could generally be reached, at any rate from my house, in a much shorter time, as it was comparatively level throughout and no hills had to be crossed except some occasional low spurs butting on the river. But from my village *upwards* this road became rapidly worse. It was, indeed, kept in as good order as possible, but at a point only three miles off the river forced its way between two mountains by a narrow fissure, and the road skirted the mountain-side, winding round the slope, with a precipice right and left, at a great height above the roaring stream. This was called the Lunka pass, and about ten miles beyond this, turning inland to the left, was Count

Barczy's estate, connected with civilization only by a long, tortuous, and muddy lane, frequently impassable in places, and always difficult for wheeled carriages. Recapitulating thus: I was posted at a junction of rivers and roads; below me one road to the railway station was good and level: from my house another, to another railway station, was hilly and steep; and the main road up the valley, which, on the whole, was good, and eventually led to a large market-town, was rendered difficult at one point by this Lunka pass. My work was mostly down stream, but as time went on it gradually extended upwards, and I had the road through the pass repaired in more places than one at the company's expense, as I could not induce the authorities to do the work, and did not wish to risk my neck more than was absolutely necessary.

On Saturday afternoon, then, having paid the men, and swallowed a hasty lunch, I started in my light springless carriage, somewhat resembling a four-wheeled dog-cart. Istvan, my Szekler coachman, was driving; next to him sat Janos, my faithful Hungarian servant. I was wrapped up in a high fur coat, and the remainder of the space was filled up by the gun-cases and a portmanteau. The day was cold and disagreeable, though not actually frosty. I found the road even more atrocious than I had expected, and it took me three hours to reach Ozd, Count Barczy's place. I shall not now describe the appearance of the mansion, nor the accommodation which the hospitable Hungarian offers to a stranger. It would fill too many pages of this brief outline, and Ozd itself was not especially characteristic of Hungarian manners, as my friend, Count Barczy, was comparatively civilized, and having travelled as far as Paris, had introduced into his abode many comforts not generally found among his countrymen. It was already dark when I reached his house. He greeted me with outstretched hands on the steps leading to the central hall, which is a feature in all Hungarian mansions, and as soon as I had got rid of my fur and other wraps, led me into the drawing-room, where I found the hostess,

a charming woman, her daughter, and my friend, Baron Hunyadi, my nearest neighbour.

There was also a stranger present to whom I was introduced as Dr. Ferencz. We were soon chatting pleasantly in a mixture of French and German, in which the former predominated, for the Hungarians have never quite got over their dislike to the language spoken by the hated Austrians. I understood Magyar perfectly well myself, but was not able to speak it. My pronunciation always caused so much amusement that I ceased to make any further attempts except in the society of my groom or coachman, whom respect would deter from laughter. Among my friends, therefore, it was supposed that I knew no Hungarian, and they were good enough occasionally to make remarks on my appearance in their own language without the slightest suspicion that I understood every word they said. Count Barczy, however, his family, and my friend Hunyadi, all spoke French fluently, though with that singular accent which never seems to be overcome by a Hungarian. I was, therefore, shortly at my ease, and by the time supper was served, had discovered that Dr. Ferencz was the family physician of all the nobility within a radius of some thirty miles. He appeared to spend most of his time in travelling from house to house, allowing his movements to be so generally known that if anybody fell ill they were pretty well informed as to his whereabouts, and could summon him at once. This mode of life, of course, made him a member of almost every family, and he appeared to be as much at home at Ozd as the daughter herself. None of his noble patients were just then suffering from any complaint requiring constant attention. He was, therefore, glad enough to spend a few days with the Barczys shooting, a sport of which to judge by his conversation at table, he was not only remarkably fond, but a very distinguished follower. It was not long before I discovered that my friend Hunyadi took an especial pleasure in drawing the good natured fat little Doctor out, and before supper was over I had heard the most marvellous tales of his extraordinary shots, of the skill with which he had brought down wolves,

boar, and even bears, and of his thorough knowledge of the noble art. He was not, however, by any means stupid, and soon discovered that Hunyadi was trotting him out.

"At all events," said he, "I killed that fox the day before yesterday."

"I don't believe you did," replied Hunyadi, "I saw the beggar run away myself."

"He may have run," retorted the Doctor, "but he was hard hit. I could see him limp distinctly. It was a splendid shot; two hundred paces at least."

"With what rifle?" I asked, innocently.

"Rifle!" laughed old Barczy. "It was only a shot gun; but you must know that the Doctor's shot guns always carry enormous distances. He cannot shoot anything if it is very near, and I only know one thing that carries further than his fowling-piece."

"What is that?" asked the Doctor.

"Why his imagination, to be sure," grunted the old gentleman. "No, Doctor, no; I don't think you killed that fox. You spent a long time looking for it, indeed, but your search was not successful."

"Well," said the Doctor, "time will show. I shall have a hunt for him to-morrow, because you know we have to cover the same ground, and I am sure I shall find him. I bet you ten florins I do."

"Done," cried Hunyadi, whispering to me that he did not believe the Doctor had ever killed anything in his life. "But," said he, "he always claims more than half the bag."

I was shown into a large room containing six beds, of which two only were occupied, one by Hunyadi, and the other by myself. This was the guest-room, and would have been equally open to any passing stranger (of noble blood) at a loss for a night's lodging. We were turned out early in the morning, and I found some little difficulty in performing my ablutions, as the water supply was excessively stinted, and one single small napkin was the only substitute for a towel I could find. I created great

amusement in the stable-yard by going to the pump, and, having ascertained that the ladies' windows did not command the position, directing one of the men to pump on my bare shoulders. Quite a little crowd assembled round me, and while I was scrubbing my dripping face, Count Barczy himself joined the group, and remarked, "What very eccentric persons Englishmen are, to be sure!"

After a very light breakfast we marched off, and just as we were issuing out of the enclosure we were joined by another gun. The newcomer was introduced to me as Count Miklos, the son of a gentleman I had frequently met. His appearance was decidedly striking. Standing about six feet two in his stockings, with very black hair, a small black moustache, a brown but distinctly healthy complexion, broad-shouldered, straight limbed and well made all over, he was a magnificent specimen of the Magyar. His eyes were the only feature which did not quite please me. Large and black though they were they seemed frequently to have a sort of sullen look, very different from the frank blue eyes of my friend Hunyadi, the little twinkling merry ones of the Doctor, or the steady grey glance of my host.

II.

Count Miklos shook hands with each of the party with a few words of greeting only, and then we trudged on.

All except Hunyadi wore the Hungarian costume—rather a short single-breasted frock coat, trimmed with fur, cut in at the waist to show the figure, and lavishly frogged, a round pork-pie hat of soft felt, with a little nob on top, and very close-fitting trousers, which were almost concealed by huge boots reaching far above the knees. How anybody could walk in those machines always puzzled me, yet the Hungarians always wore them, and certainly covered great distances without any apparent inconvenience. I had, of course, knickerbockers and gaiters, and a good pair of English shooting boots, and resisted the advice of

my friends that I should borrow their national foot covering, of which it appears spare pairs were always kept. Hunyadi had an English shooting suit, and a stiff pot hat, straight from Lincoln and Bennett, of which he was excessively proud, as it had cost him something like two guineas before it reached his hands. Although by this time in a battered condition, he wore it with an air of doing the right thing, and having travelled abroad and knowing what was appropriate for shooting. He had not, however, abandoned his national boots, which, he remarked to me, were indispensable. So, indeed, I found; for after a short time we left the lane leading towards the high road and turned our faces to the hill. The slope was covered with short grass, interrupted here and there by a stretch of Indian corn stubble. I soon found that the mounds formed in these strips, which are hoed up like a potato field, consisted of the softest possible loam, which was saturated by the previous rains, and seemed to penetrate into every crevice. I felt the horrible stuff working in between my boots and gaiters, and my step was soon no longer as jaunty as when we started. We were followed by about twenty ragged beaters and two or three attendants, who led the most mixed looking collection of dogs I ever saw. Some of them were like ill-bred pointers, some like shepherds' dogs, others again appeared to have something of the beagle. Two dachshunds were amongst them, and some boys were also dragging along curs of no breed at all.

"What on earth are you going to do with all these?" I said to Count Barczy.

"I wish we had more," he replied, "we want all we can get."

"But these," said I, pointing to two brutes with long legs, shaggy coats, ugly, broad, slouching heads, and the longest necks I ever saw, "are surely not sporting dogs."

"I don't know what you call sporting dogs," he replied, "they will drive the game out, that is all I want. You will see them at work. They are splendid animals. I know them; they belong to a shepherd down there, but I suppose he has lent

them to my bailiff to-day because he knows we want to make a good show of sport."

Well, I thought to myself that this was a queer arrangement. Here is a shepherd good enough to lend his two dogs to his landlord for a day's shooting. The behaviour of the various animals did not so far tend to dissipate my mistrust. Some of them refused to stir, and had constantly to be flogged on. Others were straining at the leash; others again began fighting among each other and entangling themselves round everybody's legs, and, lastly, some exhibited symptoms of excessive friendliness, which was almost as unpleasant as the snarls of open hostility which proceeded from other sides. After a weary trudge we at last reached the edge of the wood, which extended apparently up to the crest of the hills far in front of us, and for miles right and left. There was a short consultation here in Hungarian between Count Barczy and his bailiff, upon which we separated.

The Count, beckoning to me, said, "I will give you the best place, as you are a stranger. Come up this path with me, and you are sure to get a chance at a deer."

The other three guns were told to remain at the edge of the wood while we proceeded upwards. The track was narrow, muddy, and covered with fallen leaves, so progress was excessively slow. After going about half a mile the Count said—

"Now you stop here."

We were at the edge of a glade, into which the path led, continuing on the far side of it. In the middle of the glade was a small pond. "Now," said the Count, "if there are any deer in the wood they are sure to make for this glade. They always come here to water, and this is the very best place for shooting them all round; I shall go on another half-mile further," added he, proceeding.

I was rather puzzled, as it appeared to me that, by the positions in which we were placed, it would have required some five hundred men to beat the area of the wood properly. Any number of head of game could have escaped between the Count and me, or

between me and the other guns below, without being seen, still less shot. However I concluded it was Hungarian fashion, and walking up and down as gently as possible, for the Count had warned me to make no noise, I waited for some time entirely in vain. At length I heard the most terrible hooting, yelling, and howling, which seemed to be gradually approaching me. It was at first very indistinct, and neared me but slowly; still it was approaching, and that was some consolation, as my position was becoming extremely uncomfortable. I hardly dared to move and I was getting thoroughly chilled. At last I distinguished amidst the mass of noises the bay of dogs, and, sure enough, I found that all the various animals had been let loose in the forest, and were wildly rushing about in every direction; some on one scent, some on another, some on none at all, but all loudly giving tongue in various voices. Shortly I heard the underwood crackle, and one of the shepherds' dogs bolted out yelling dismally and pursuing something or other, I know not what. Another minute and I caught a glimpse of a beast like a beagle breaking through the brambles, and also yelling as loud as possible. In fact before this beat was over no less than seven animals rushed past me making a most awful noise, but not one bit of fur or feather did I see. Just as I thought that all the fun was over I heard bang, bang, from the far edge of the wood, and resolved to wait patiently till I should be relieved. In another few minutes a large bird flew out close to me. I was just going to fire when I fortunately discovered that it was only a magpie. I thus saved myself from what would have been probably brought against me for ever in Hungary. After a little more weary waiting the Count joined me.

"Well," he said, "what have you seen?"

"Nothing," I replied, "whatever, except the dogs."

"But," he said, "it's a capital place; the dogs would not have come this way if there had not been game in front of them; you must have gone to sleep."

"No," I said, "I did not go to sleep; it was much too cold; but, I assure you, I saw no game."

"Well," he said, "the dogs could not deceive me; they were running something or other, and I am sorry you had not a chance of seeing what it was. Come, let us join the others."

When we did so, we found that the two shots had proceeded from Count Miklos, who had killed a hare. Nothing else had been seen or fired at, and the beaters then proceeded to attempt to collect the dogs; but this was easier said than done. We heard various discordant yells from distant corners of the woods. Occasionally a sound appeared to be approaching nearer and then died away again; then, again, they would be heard quite close, or even the brushwood rustling, but no dogs appeared. The ragamuffins plunged into the thicket, calling in a most frantic way for their darlings, who, however, were far too engrossed with the chase to pay any attention to their masters' summons. Still the distant bay continued; now one note, now another was heard; sometimes it seemed to come from the long thin throat of the shepherd's dog, at others from the cross-bred pointer. The whole forest seemed alive with dogs. Then, again, for a few minutes there was dead silence. All this appeared to me thoroughly unsatisfactory, but as the others did not seem to mind it I felt it was my duty not to grumble. My host calmly observed—"We must wait till they get their dogs back."

Hunyadi made a cigarette, sitting down on the stump of a tree, and offered me one. Miklos pulled a huge pipe from his pocket, filled it with Turkish tobacco, and began puffing silently and somewhat sulkily. The little Doctor only preserved his liveliness. He declared that meanwhile he would go and look for the fox—"The one," he remarked, "which I killed on Friday."

"Go, by all means," said Hunyadi.

"Don't be such an ass," growled Barczy.

But the little man would not be denied. Off he went with a couple of beaters, who, as they were not owners of dogs, appeared to feel no special interest in the proceedings.

As there was nothing else to do, and I was not used to the

light breakfast followed by a fast of six hours, which is the usual custom in Hungary, I pulled out the carcase of an old fowl, which I had been careful to supply myself with on the previous day, and began gnawing the limbs. We talked of one thing and the other, and I ventured to enquire whether it was usual to send a number of wild dogs into the forest and then to spend half a day in trying to catch them. "Well," explained Barczy, "you see we don't pretend to give grand shooting parties about here, and, therefore, we don't find it any use to keep a number of dogs on purpose; but, if we did, they would not be any better. I am very much surprised to hear what you tell me of English dogs. I cannot imagine a beast that will refrain from running after game if he scents it. I can hardly suppose that your statements are quite correct. Why, how is it with your foxhounds? They run fast enough, and they never leave the scent of a fox until they have killed him or until he runs to earth."

I tried to explain the difference between shooting and hunting, but found it was a mystery to Barczy, and clear only to Hunyadi who had followed the Empress's foxhounds at Pest. Even he, however, had no idea of an English pointer, still less of a retriever, and seemed to imagine that the functions of the canine race were solely to scent the game and then run after it. While I was thus endeavouring to make my two friends (for Miklos was meanwhile still sulkily smoking his pipe some distance off) understand what we call a dog in England we heard a shout from the low bed of a little streamlet a few hundred yards away. Looking towards the place we perceived a figure violently waving his hat, and Hunyadi said, lazily rising, "Oh its the Doctor." As we sauntered towards him he ran to meet us, and exclaimed "I have found him! I have found him!" "What?" asked Hunyadi. "Why, the fox," screamed the Doctor, "sure enough there he is;" and sure enough there he was, for we had hardly gone a few steps further when a most horrible stench very nearly drove us into a precipitate retreat. But the Doctor, nothing daunted, plunged into the thicket, and soon

issued therefrom, dragging a huge dog-fox after him. As he approached we fled in dismay, for the animal's scent was, after three days of mild muggy weather, more powerful than pleasant. "I have won my ten florins," shouted the Doctor. "Here you are," answered Hunyadi, casting a note of that amount on the ground, "but, for goodness sake, don't come near me."

"Oh!" said the Doctor, "if I do not bring my fox with me you fellows will say that I never killed it;" and with these words he tried to stuff the animal into the leather game bag he carried, but, though large, it was scarcely adapted to hold the old dog.

"Doctor," said the Count solemnly, "if you don't give that fox to one of the beaters I will shoot you;" and really the old gentleman looked ferocious as he slowly raised his gun to his shoulder, and deliberately covered our rubicund and excited friend. "All right, Count, all right, I will put him down," said he, "but I do not care to trust these beaters. You know they are only Wallachs, and they would take the fox home to dinner."

"To dinner," sneered Hunyadi, "why there is not a dog in the place that would touch the beast; we could smell him a mile off." "But," said the Doctor, "I killed the fox, although you all said I had missed him. I am determined, at any rate, to have his brush to show, and his skin will make a beautiful rug." After some more parleying it was at last agreed that the fox should be carefully concealed under some brushwood, the place marked, and that we should call for him on our way home, though what the Doctor intended to do with this putrified animal was more than I could state. Meanwhile the dogs began coming in by twos and threes, and at last when one only was missing we started for a fresh beat. About this one there is no more to tell than about the first. I was posted in a different, and, perhaps, pleasanter position on the edge of the wood. I saw one jackdaw, two crows, and a great many dogs, but nothing at which I thought it worth while to fire; although I was sorely tempted by some of the snarling brutes that were

"Dragging behind him a huge dog fox."

wildly careering about me after more or less imaginary game. Count Miklos got the best of us, for he dropped a woodcock. The Doctor sent two barrels after a fox which he saw, and which I suppose existed, since several of the beaters confirmed his assertion, but otherwise nothing was done; and as it was now three o'clock, and at least another hour would be required for the various dogs to be collected, we made for home. At the door Count Miklos shouted to his groom to bring his horse round.

"Surely," said my host, "you are going to stop to dine."

"No, thank you," said he, silently handing his gun to the attendant, "I must get home." A magnificent thorough-bred was brought out, standing about sixteen hands, and, though appearing slight for a hunter, fully able to carry even so stalwart a man as Count Miklos a few miles over any country. Before mounting he just stroked the animal's neck—the first symptom of any friendly feeling to man or beast I had observed. The horse neighed and went off at full gallop as soon as his owner was in the saddle. The latter turned back, just waving a friendly salutation to Count Barczy, and then disappeared down the lane.

III.

When we had made ourselves comfortable by ablutions, and had got rid of our heavy boots, during which operation by-the-bye I discovered that the mud had penetrated through my English shooting boots, or (not to libel the bootmaker) between them and the gaiters, to such an extent that I might almost as well have had nothing on at all, we collected with ravenous appetite in the dining hall. Almost the first remark made by the Countess was "Where is Miklos?"

"Oh," answered her husband in Hungarian, "you know he never stops out to dinner now."

"What a pity," said she.

"My dear Mariska," answered the Count, "you know when

a man is once under petticoat-government no interference is of any use."

These remarks made me prick up my ears, but, as they were exchanged in Hungarian, it was evidently intended that I should not understand them. I therefore held my peace. I endeavoured in vain to lead the conversation back again to Miklos, but all I could ascertain was that he did not live at his father's house, but on a small estate which was part of his grandmother's dower.

It was arranged that the next morning we were to beat the open for hares and any stray bird which might happen to be lying in the stubble or anyone of the ditches, of which there were plenty. This beat would take me towards my home, and, as already mentioned, I had arranged that my horse was to meet me above Lunka. Count Miklos joined us just after breakfast. Silent as before, he only exchanged the merest civilities with our otherwise jolly party. Strips of stubble being now beaten by men and dogs combined, the hares took refuge in the woods, and some of them were cut off by the sportsmen who were kept steadily walking along the edge of the forest. Our function appeared to me, however, to extend also to keeping the dogs out of the woods, for whenever a hare emerged it was always followed by at least two dogs, if not three, and unless the hare was killed they always disappeared, and nothing more was seen or heard of them, except an occasional distant bay. The dogs were clearly not fast enough to catch or turn the hare, but possessed just sufficient scent to stick to her all day if necessary, and not sagacity enough to obey anyone's call.

We had thus proceeded for about three hours, and had bagged six hares and a woodcock between us, when it began to snow, at first slowly, then more and more. The wind, too, rose, and it became altogether excessively disagreeable. We were a long march from home, but we had not yet reached the point which was to be the end of our day's work. Not far off was that house surrounded by trees, which I had already noticed as being situated a couple of miles above Lunka.

"What a thundering nuisance this snow is," said Hunyadi.

"We can't go on shooting," said Barczy, "it is hopeless."

"You are a lucky fellow," added the Doctor to Miklos, "you have got your place close by."

"It is quite at your service, gentlemen," said Miklos, "if you will accept my very modest hospitality after the grandeur of Ozd; you had better come in out of the snow."

The others looked at each other, but I did not hesitate for an instant, for I was glad not only to escape the atrocious weather, but also to know something more about that mysterious Miklos, who had scarcely said six words in two days, and whose departure was alluded to in veiled language by my hostess and host. We tramped into the muddy courtyard and up the steps, where a Hungarian servant opened the door.

"Where is the young lady?" asked Miklos, in Hungarian, clearly, like the others, supposing that I did not understand the language.

"I don't know, my lord," was the servant's rejoinder.

Miklos seemed to frown, but strode on in front of us. He opened a door which led into a large room, comfortably furnished, hung with guns, swords, and hunting knives, and decorated all round with trophies of the chase. There was an open fire-place at one end—a most unusual sight in Hungary. My eyes instantly fixed themselves on the pleasant spectacle of brightly-blazing logs, but they did not dwell on them long, for, as we came in, there arose from the large white rug before the fire-place something black. Very black it looked against the background of the glowing embers, but in a moment more I distinguished the reclining form of a woman, clearly a young one. As we came further into the room she raised herself on her elbows and stared vacantly at us.

She had probably been lying asleep before the pleasant fire, when our entrance disturbed her. She looked round like people do when they are suddenly awakened from slumber; her face was pale, except with the glow of the fire on one side. She had very large blue eyes under arched eyebrows, a quantity of matted

black hair, which hung low on her forehead, and a well-shaped mouth, which showed the whitest of teeth, and which was half open in amazement.

"Get up, Ilka," said Miklos crossly; "what do you mean by lying there like a dog?" This in Hungarian; then, turning to me, he added—"I beg your pardon; these Hungarian girls don't know manners."

Meanwhile the figure was slowly rising. She stood up at last, threw her hair back from her forehead with one hand, seemed gradually to wake up, and cast down those eyes which before had been gazing round so wildly. She was extremely tall; I should think not less than five feet ten; her figure, as far as it could be made out in the dim twilight and by the firelight, as perfect as can be imagined. She had sloping shoulders, a tiny waist, and yet she appeared capable of felling a bullock. Poising her head humbly yet majestically she said "What would you, Miklos?"

"Go and see whether we can get some dinner," answered he roughly; "you should have been looking after the household instead of going to sleep by the fire. I have guests; see that they are attended to!"

She did not reply, but, with one deprecating glance in the direction where Hunyadi and I were standing, warming our feet on the dogs, and a simple nod of the head, she glided from the room with a step as graceful as Diana's but as proud as Juno's. None of us seemed ready to talk after this apparition. Ferencz made a jocular remark that the young lady did not appear to want his professional care, but as this was only replied to by a grunt from Miklos it led to no further talk. I had now one very important matter in my mind; I was anxious to find out whether Miklos understood German. Seeing that he was silent and suspicious, and had evidently brought us into his den very much against his will, and simply because he dared not infringe on the hospitable rules of his order, I felt that I could not put to him any direct question. I therefore tried to begin a conversation about Vienna, Paris, Berlin, and

other foreign cities, asking my friends whether they had been there, and how they liked their journeys. By strenuous efforts and a display of humble civility, which quite astonished my friend Hunyadi, I managed to drag Miklos into the current of talk. When describing anything in which he took an interest—as, for instance, the races at Pest—he became enthusiastic and lost all his sulkiness. He had a fine baritone voice, and although the conversation was quite colloquial, he occasionally spoke with a vigour almost amounting to eloquence.

Still, I was not to be diverted by any side-issues from my self-appointed task, which was to discover whether he spoke or understood German; and I at last succeeded in gathering from him that he hated the Austrians and knew no single word of their language. French, he said, was quite sufficient to carry a man through civilized Europe. That he had learnt, but he had forgotten some of it. These admissions were not obtained without great trouble, for there were frequent interruptions to the conversation as one or another of the servants put his head in, pulled off our boots, brought us shoes, or enquired what the master's wishes were with respect to the wine, horses, &c. At last, however, dinner was announced, and I was extremely curious to know whether the fair Ilka would attend. My curiosity was speedily satisfied. When we entered the hall where dinner was served she was sitting at the head of the table.

"What do you mean by sitting there?" growled Miklos, savagely, in Hungarian.

She blushed violently, and answered in so low tones that I could not understand them. Good old Barczy, however, interfered. "Let the little girl sit there," he remarked. "You surely would not have her waiting on us with your grooms? There is no one here to do her any harm. Why are you so infernally jealous?"

Jealous? thought I to myself; that is the solution of the mystery. He is surely good looking enough and big enough to be able to keep his love for himself, and to frighten away any

rival; and, indeed, although he continued to address Ilka, when he was obliged to speak to her, in the roughest and sulkiest of tones, no one could fail to be impressed by his gallant mien, his handsome face, and thoroughly manly appearance. He was evidently ill at ease. After some little difficulty as to places, the Doctor was put down on one side of Ilka, while on the other side was old Barczy, certainly the least dangerous of us all. I sat next to the Doctor, with Hunyadi opposite to me, and at the foot of the oval table was, of course, Miklos himself. Everything went on smoothly enough at dinner. Every now and then the Doctor whispered something to the fair girl who was acting as hostess, and sometimes she smiled languidly, but on the whole she was excluded from the general conversation. Miklos talked as much and as loud as he could, clearly trying to make Hunyadi and myself attend to him, and answer him only. He certainly gave us no time to do more than look at Ilka. I could not make the girl out. She was evidently bullied, or at any rate very harshly used by Miklos. On the other hand, though she seemed thoroughly afraid of him, I observed her eyes looking for his occasionally, with a glance which implied anything rather than hatred. It might have been beseeching, appealing, or even loving, but it was not aversion. When she did speak, however, it was merely to answer in monosyllables some chaffy remark of the Doctor's, or to press her neighbours to eat of the dishes before them.

At last Barczy enquired, "Have you been out shooting lately?"

"No," answered Ilka, "I have not been out for a week. Miklos has been busy with his farmers, and, of course, I could not join your party."

"Why not?" asked the old gentleman. "The Countess would have been glad enough to see you."

This staggered me. Peculiar people, thought I, these Hungarians. This young lady's position is surely more than equivocal, and here is the most respectable landed proprietor in the country expressing his wife's willingness to receive her

"Oh," continued she, smilingly, "you know Miklos does not like me to go out with strangers."

"But," argued Barczy, "there were no strangers in this party, nobody but the Englishman."

She hissed softly between her red lips instead of replying; but Barczy continued, "Oh, we may talk; the Englishman does not understand Hungarian."

"But he understands German," I rapidly said to her almost under my voice, while the Doctor was turning his head to help himself from a dish just handed, and the two others were listening to a loud remark of Miklos's on the subject of the sport we had had. What instinct prompted me thus to risk this observation, I cannot now explain. I had had no evidence whatever that the fair Ilka understood a single word of German. On the contrary, what evidence there was, went entirely the other way, yet, to use an American expression, I had "struck ile;" for though no one else at the dinner table understood my words, for the simple reason that the others knew but very little German, and would, therefore, not catch the sense of a sentence spoken low and quickly, Ilka evidently did. There was a quick glance of wonder, which gave me an opportunity I had long wished for—to admire her big blue eyes. Then a smile of pleased surprise, but then the ball of conversation returned to her. No further opportunity occurred for our exchanging any remarks without attracting undue attention, and, as soon as we had finished our dinner, cards were brought out for the favourite Hungarian game of Tarok. This game was my especial abhorrence. I, therefore, excused myself, and made myself comfortable in an armchair smoking, while the others, including Ilka, joined in it. A messenger had been sent to my station to bring on my horses, and I went out to inquire after them. My friends were already so excited over their game that they hardly noticed my departure, which was not without a little ulterior purpose. I stopped in the hall much longer than was absolutely necessary, and was at last rewarded by the appearance of the beautiful Ilka on the threshold. I immediately spoke to

her in German. "How is it," I said, "that you are locked up here in this desert place far from any one?"

She proudly drew herself up. "What right have you to ask me questions?" she said.

"Oh none, I admit, Fräulein," I answered, "but it appeared to me that you are almost like a prisoner."

"It appeared to you wrong, then," she replied; "you should not judge from appearances," and bowing, as if she had been a queen, she added, "I must look after the coffee."

I knew that she was bound to come back the same way, and therefore waited. I made a fresh attempt when I saw her return.

"Why did you not come out shooting to-day?" I asked.

"Because I did not choose," she answered.

This was not encouraging. Almost at a loss as to what to say next, I said: "Do you not find it dull here?"

"Oh, yes," she admitted, "it is often very dull when Miklos is away. I am glad to see friends come. I am very fond of shooting and riding, but only with Miklos."

"What do you do all day when he is out?" I further ventured to ask.

"I go to sleep," said she, "when I have attended to the household, and thus the time passes."

"Do you never go out by yourself?"

"No," she said, "not beyond the garden; Miklos won't let me. I mean," she added, hastily, "I don't care about it."

I pretended not to have heard her involuntary admission. "May I come and see you?" I inquired.

"Ask Miklos," she answered again, but this time half playfully. "Why did you whisper to me in German at dinner? You know Hungarian, though you pretend you don't? Why this pretence, and why not speak aloud to me in German?"

I made a bold plunge. "Because I think you are the most beautiful woman I ever saw, and quite unworthy of Miklos."

"Ha! ha!" she laughed, sarcastically. "Perhaps more worthy of *you*? Why, Miklos would knock you down with his little finger!" and with that she hurried into the drawing room.

IV.

AFTER a decent interval I followed her.

"Your friend speaks German," Ilka said, calmly, a few minutes later, addressing Count Barczy.

"Oh, yes," answered he, "of course he does.

"Well," she added, boldly, pushing away her chair from the table, "I am sick of these cards; I shall talk to him a little till his horses come."

Miklos raised his head, looked furious, and said a few words in Hungarian under his breath.

"Let the poor girl alone," interrupted Barczy, soothing him. "Don't make a scene when an Englishman is here. Surely she is doing no harm in talking to the stranger. It is not particularly civil of us to be sitting here playing cards while he is smoking his pipe in solitude. He does not care about the game, no foreigner can. Let Ilka talk to him."

"No," said she, suddenly changing her mind, "I shall play," and off she went to the piano and began one of those Hungarian national melodies in a minor key, which so strangely affect anybody fresh to them, and seem to stir the depths of one's soul to an emotion hitherto unknown. Need it be said that I gradually edged my way to the piano, dropped my cigarette, and talked to Ilka in the intervals of her tunes?

"If Miklos had heard you just now," she said, "he would have killed you. You don't know him."

"He is very big and very strong," I answered, "but he does not love you."

"Oh, yes, he does," she replied, "and I love him, so it is of no use your telling me that I am beautiful. I know it. I have been told so by everybody who comes here. Tell me something new, that I don't know—of foreign countries, of England, of horses, and of shooting."

So I told. Whether the charms of those magnificent eyes, or the singular fascination of the music lent me eloquence, I know not, but at any rate my tales seemed to interest her. When I told her of following the fox at full cry through bull-finches, over post and rails, and breezy uplands and heavy ploughs, she seemed to listen in breathless attention. When I told her of tiger shooting in India, when we waited in silent anxiety for the man-eater to approach the goat laid as a bait for him, she hung on my words with sympathetic silence. When I described to her London with its thousands of carriages, its bustling crowds, its black houses, and its smoky atmosphere, she opened her eyes as wide as a child over a fairy tale, and when after our conversation had lasted long enough, and her lord and master began to cast anxious glances more and more frequently towards the piano, with an occasional subdued growl as of the lion preparing to spring, she said, "You must come and amuse me when Miklos is out."

"When?" I whispered.

"On Thursday," she said. "Be in the little wood below the house at twelve o'clock. I will come down, but you must amuse me, for I am very dull, though Miklos is very good to me—oh, very good."

As she said these last words, she closed the piano with a bang. At the same time the servant opened the door and announced my horses. I bid adieu all round, thanking both Barczy and Miklos warmly for their hospitality, wrapped myself in my furs, and drove off through the snow into the dark night.

Singular thoughts crowded on me as I slowly rode homewards. I was fascinated, almost overwhelmed, by the extraordinary beauty of this girl whom I had found on the rug, lying like a dog before the fire, in apathetic dulness. No apparition more perfect had ever crossed my path. Face, form, and expression were alike faultless. There was not any single point about her which the most severe critic could wish otherwise. Perhaps some people might have objected to her intensely pale complexion, which was only occasionally suffused by a crimson glow; but pale though her colour, it was clearly healthy. She had spoken of her numerous shooting excursions and of her long rides. The Doctor had mentioned, in jocular tones, that he had never been called in to attend her, so her pallor was evidently not the result of illness. It was that dark hue which lies between the rich carnation of the Roman and the sallow paleness of the Sicilian. Her lips were full and red, her hands small, taper, and white. Her whole appearance betrayed great strength, force of character, and pride, yet could she, as I saw when her eyes fell on Miklos, be gentle and submissive to those she loved. Nor could this beautiful creature be wholly bad, since Count Barczy had invited her to his house. It is true that irregular unions are not looked upon in Hungary with the same abhorrence as with us. Still a line is drawn even there, and no person of really bad character would be received in a house tenanted by ladies. On the other hand they are lenient towards those erring couples who have neglected or who postpone sanctioning the tie which connects them by the Church and the Mayor. They are willing to suppose that the ceremony will shortly come off, and if the lady is considered to have led a proper life before, and is not supposed to be flirting with other men at the time, she may be accepted, if not as an equal of the wives and daughters of her neighbours, still as one who may at any moment become their equal, and whose fault would then be condoned. Yet this Hungarian leniency did not quite explain Ilka's position, for Miklos, while evidently fiercely jealous of her, had kept the affair as much as possible secret. I felt sure that he was a brute, not-

withstanding her assertions to the contrary, and only saw the more reason to admire her because she stood up in his defence. Her German was so pure that I doubted whether she was of Hungarian stock; so that altogether the matter was a mystery to me, and the more I pondered the more mysterious did it seem to become. Nearly all night I laid awake thinking of the beautiful stranger. I do not know whether I was in love with her, but at any rate she had raised in me the most lively interest, and I was determined at any price to keep the appointment for Thursday. It was, however, difficult for me to get away, particularly at the audacious hour of noon, and it was still more difficult to keep my departure secret. As I have mentioned, Count Miklos's place lay a little on the left of the road, beyond Lunka. Up to the point where I should have had to turn off there were labourers at work, and my assistant staking out the line, so that I could not hope to pass without my ride being noticed and commented on by a number of persons. The distance was too great for me to walk and the mud too deep. I should have arrived in no condition to present myself before a lady on whom I wished to make a favourable impression. I, therefore, resolved to confide my doubts to the faithful Janos, which I did while dressing on the memorable Thursday. Janos was perfectly delighted. An intrigue of any sort, or the appearance of one, was to him as manna from heaven.

"Does your Lordship wish to see Count Miklos's lady?" said he.

"Yes," said I; "do you know anything about her?"

"Well," said Janos, "she is kept very close, but I know that she comes from a distant part of the country, and Count Miklos's father is very much displeased because his son will not give her up."

"Why does he not marry her?" I asked.

"They say," answered Janos, "that she is not noble, but I do not know. She is handsome enough even for your Lordship."

"I am much obliged to you," I said, "for your good opinion.

Now the question is, how am I to get there without being seen?"

Janos reflected for a moment. At last he said, "I know a path round the hills, but it is twice as far as by the road, and it is very rough. I can take you that way and nobody would have the slightest idea where we were going, but it would be at least two hours' ride."

"All right," I said, "get the horses ready for ten o'clock, we will start then."

Away we went at the appointed hour up through the village, by tumble-down houses and wretched cottages and ragged gardens, which extended some distance along a lateral valley I had never visited. We followed a rough bridle-path for some time, and then diverged up the hills, where the track became rapidly worse and worse. In the woods it was an absolute slough of despond, our horses sinking almost up to their knees at every second step. It was the most wretched ride that I remember, but after about two hours Janos, who had been leading, pulled up his horse and said, "Now we are close by." Going on cautiously, we shortly reached a gap in the woods, and found ourselves almost exactly above Count Miklos's house. We could see the ordinary road to it winding away in the opposite direction. We had, therefore, described a complete semicircle. Janos reconnoitred for a few minutes. "The Count is out," he said at last.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because," answered he, "the stable door is open, the door of the stable where his own riding-horses are kept. That would not be the case if he were at home," and indeed the yard appeared deserted. We could see straight down into it from our position. The little wood was on our left, and Janos now proposed to hold the horses while I crept round on the edge, but just within the forest, till I reached a point where it almost joined on to Count Miklos's enclosure. I carried this plan out without any further accident than tearing my face and scratching my hands with the brambles, and had hardly entered the wood when I saw Ilka rise from a log on which she had been resting, wrapped in

fur. I bowed, and approaching her began some complimentary speech.

"Now," said she, "please don't begin to flatter me. Every man that comes to this house falls in love with me, and every one of them tells me so. I don't care a straw about any of them, but I am very tired of hearing the same thing repeated so often. Speak to me of your home, tell me something interesting and amusing, and don't go on like all the rest, saying that I am beautiful. I know I am. I never had the slightest doubt about it since I grew up."

I was still stiff from my ride and scramble, chilled to the marrow of my bones, and not by way of being very amusing nor lively. Still I did my best to invent fresh subjects. I hit off the idea of telling her the story of one of Schiller's plays: "Mary Stuart," of which I knew a good portion by heart, so that I was able, as I went on, to quote some of the finest passages without the slightest difficulty. This interested her amazingly, and, when after an hour or so, I stopped, she overwhelmed me with questions about Elizabeth, about Mary, and in fact about the whole history of England of the sixteenth century. She was evidently perfectly ignorant, and she drank in knowledge with the greatest avidity. It is scarcely necessary to remark that during all this conversation I had found no occasion to consider her less beautiful than before. On the contrary, every moment convinced me more and more of her surpassing loveliness. At last, however, she said, "It is time for me to go in. Miklos may arrive at any moment."

"May I come again?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "he is going away next week for two days. Meet me here at dusk on Wednesday, but keep out of the sight of the servants, or they would talk, and Miklos would shoot you; and promise not to make love to me, but to tell me amusing stories as you did to-day."

Thus instructed I departed, and it is unnecessary for me to repeat here all the conversations which took place between us. Suffice it to say that I met her again and again, always riding by

this wretched path, always spending five hours in the saddle in order to look at her for a few short minutes, and on every successive occasion becoming more and more deeply enamoured. Somehow it appears that these repeated visits were at last observed. It became most difficult for her to come out, as Miklos was constantly watching her. Once or twice I had been stopped by ragged but fierce-looking natives, who asked me in a surly tone where I was going; but the time which had elapsed had not been entirely wasted. I had not only instructed Ilka in English history, but I had also ascertained her own. She was, it appears, the only daughter of an innkeeper, about fifty miles off, in the German Banat. Miklos had stopped at the hotel a year before, when the house of a friend where he was shooting was filled to overflowing, and bachelors were consigned to the care of the German host. He had fallen in love with the beautiful girl, and she with him. He did not dare to marry her, but he had no objection to take her home without marrying her. She was ignorant, loving, and foolish. It was the old story. He carried her off, took her to the gloomy house on his mother's estate, and no persuasion on the part of his parents could induce him to give up the beauty he had conquered. At this, no one could be surprised, I least of all, but I could not help expressing my astonishment that Ilka should have so long borne a life which was clearly as irksome to her as it was melancholy and uneventful. She admitted, with sighs, and almost with tears, that she regretted deeply having left her home. She believed that her parents would gladly receive her back, but she had written to them, and had had no answer. When we became more intimate, she confessed her fears that Miklos, to whom she had entrusted her letters, had suppressed them. This I thought by no means unlikely, and I begged her to give me a letter to those parents, who had not heard of their child for nearly twelve months. The lawlessness existing in Hungary explained why they had not dared to demand her back from the young nobleman who had carried her off. Even if they knew where she was, they, as plebeians, would have exposed themselves to outrage,

and possibly to death, if they had come to claim their daughter. Miklos would undoubtedly summon his attendants to defend his prize, and they would have had no hesitation in shooting down any and every intruder. Ilka confessed at last that she would be delighted to go away if she saw a chance of escaping. She had, she told me, once or twice expressed to Miklos a desire to see her parents again, but his fury had been so terrible that she dared not return to the subject, and yet notwitstanding all this she was still much in love with him. She asked me whether I had ever seen a handsomer or finer man, and I was obliged to admit that I had not.

"Well," she said, "you always declare that I am the most beautiful woman you ever saw. Then surely we are well matched." Thus between her love for Miklos, or rather her passionate admiration of him, for it was scarcely what we understand by the term love, and her yearning desire to be back in the quiet home of her childhood, and relieved from the oppressive dull tyranny which kept her almost a prisoner, her feelings were sorely divided. It was my task to incline the balance towards freedom and home. I persuaded her to give me a letter to her father, and having noted the address, I took the liberty of writing one myself, urging strongly the pitiable condition in which this girl was. How she would become a mere savage, would lose the little notion of religion and morality she still possessed, and would in the hands of Miklos gradually fall, till she became a miserable creature, scarcely different except by her beauty from the beasts of the field. I added, that if her father would receive her at home, and if she had no reproaches to fear from him, I felt sure that I could bring her to him, and that if she cultivated her magnificent voice, and her dramatic talents, which were of no mean order, she would be able at some future time to earn her living on the stage, or possibly marry some one and settle down in her own rank of life. As I could not trust the village-postmaster, I sent these letters off by the faithful Janos to the railway-station, and anxiously waited the reply.

Miklos had become so suspicious that it was positively

dangerous for me and for Ilka to hold any more meetings in the wood, except after dark, and with the utmost secrecy. I allowed ten days for an answer, and therefore fixed one more rendezvous at the same place, but for eleven o'clock at night, when she said Miklos was always lying on the white rug before the fire, snoring It appears that he seldom actually went to bed, but, like a savage, threw off his boots and cast himself down before the embers with a fur rug over him to sleep off his fatigue and the fumes of the wine he drank freely. Nothing could well have been more dangerous than to meet in the middle of the night. Apart from any feelings of jealousy, Miklos would have been perfectly justified in shooting down like a dog any person he found at that hour trespassing on his premises. However, faint heart ne'er won fair lady, so I rode off about seven o'clock one evening, carrying the precious answer to the letter in the pocket of my coat, and carefully picking my way up the now frozen forest-track. I had frequently to get off my horse and lead him, and twice I lost my way, but having allowed myself no less than four hours, I managed to reach the trysting place before eleven o'clock, and there found Janos, who had slunk across on foot unobserved, crouching in ditches, and hiding himself behind hedges. The moment he saw me he tied up the horse's nose with a handkerchief and tethered his fore legs, and then, fearful of every footstep, I brought the letter down to the dark glade where I expected to find her.

V.

I HAD fortunately taken the precaution of bringing my railway lamp with me, a convenient English invention, which came in very handy when I had to pick my way home on dark nights through the deep mud of the village streets, or when, as frequently happened, I had to read manuscript out of doors in the night. After some trouble I lighted the apparatus and held it so that its light fell on the page, but away from the house. Ilka stooped over the letter, which trembled in her hand, for

emotionless as she was generally, this first news from home after nearly a year could not but cause some exhibition of feeling. Nothing could have been kinder and more fatherly than the tone of the epistle. Everything was to be forgiven and forgotten, and Ilka would be received as if she had never left her parents. Her room, said the old gentleman, was ready prepared for her, and he would himself come some miles by train to meet her. He begged her with all the strength in his power to leave her present abode and to trust the Englishman who, as he was good enough to add, had shown that he meant honestly by her, by himself writing to her father. When she had done the letter Ilka handed it to me to read, and in turn held the lamp for me. The style was not highly cultivated, but it testified to a fairly educated man, full of affection for his erring daughter.

"Well," I asked, folding the paper and returning it to her as I carefully extinguished the lantern, "when will you go?"

"I am frightened to go," said she. "Miklos would overtake us on the road and certainly kill us."

"Nonsense," I laughed with the Englishman's habitual ignorance, and therefore contempt of dangers he is not accustomed to in his own country, "nobody would dare to touch you when you are under my protection, and no one would think of shooting me as soon as we get clear of the estate, and that we could do in five minutes. Come at once," I added. "Miklos is asleep, you can get on my horse and I will lead you home. Then we can have a carriage prepared and drive on to the railway."

"Oh," she said, "my good friend, I believe you wish me well, but what you propose is perfectly absurd. Nothing could be more ridiculous than to attempt to get away in the manner you suggest. Why, we could only go at a foot's pace, and before we had reached the pass of Lunka, Miklos would be on us with all his men. It is quite out of the question; besides, I can't start like this. No," she said, "think of some better plan, and recollect that he will rouse all the peasantry, and that unless we get away fast, as fast as horses will take us, to the railway sta-

tion, we shall be stopped at every cottage, and a man will shoot at us from behind every hedge."

Although at first incredulous, I asked several questions, and the answers I received to them from Ilka, who was perfectly calm, convinced me that the dangers she apprehended were not entirely imaginary. From what has preceded it will be seen that I had already been more or less watched, and even stopped when going to the occasional places of meeting appointed, but I had attached very little weight to these circumstances, because the men who stopped me, or those whom Janos had noticed watching me, were retainers of Count Miklos, absolutely engaged about the house or the stables, and at my own station nothing, so far, had been said, nor had anything suspicious been heard. A good friend of mine had, it is true, chaffed me once or twice about my frequent rides into the woods. This was a Frenchman, a young engineer of extraordinary quickness and intelligence, with the stature of a dwarf but the strength and nerves of a giant. He had occasionally hinted to me to be cautious, and suggested that my visits to the fair one in the forest, as he chose to term her, were not quite unaccompanied by danger; but all this I had taken as mere chaff, and fondly supposed that Miklos had no notion of my meetings with his lady love, or that if he had it was of no consequence. Still Ilka's positive assurance of danger shook my confidence, and I said, "Wait a minute, I will try to scheme out a plan. I am sure it is not necessary to be so very cautious, but possibly we had better err on the side of prudence." After a few minutes' reflection I hit upon what I thought a brilliant idea, and communicated it to Ilka, who was still standing reflectively and without moving a muscle of her countenance waiting for what I had to say. She had never at any previous meetings nor to-day shown any signs whatever of affection for me. She had laughed and had been amused at the tales I told her. She had been interested in chatting with me, and had been pleased in a sort of mild way at the intense admiration which my every word implied without expressing, but although anxious to be relieved from the monotony of the life

which was killing her, and panting for freedom from the servitude in which Miklos held her, she seemed to regard me in no other light but as a trustworthy and reliable tool for relieving her from both. Even now, at the decisive moment, when I unfolded my plan to her, she preserved her usual impassibility.

She suggested an alteration in some detail and a modification in the hour of departure, but otherwise manifested neither excitement nor joy. It is not necessary now to tell what my plan was, since the events will show it. Suffice it to say that I found the greatest difficulty in one matter, which as an ignorant bachelor, I had hitherto not considered. Ilka positively refused to start without her trunk, her "things," as she called them. No argument would convince her that to take this formidable article with us would necessarily oblige us to drive instead of riding, and must retard our flight. It was of no use my assuring her that I could place ample funds at her disposal for purchasing anything she might require before she reached home. "No," she said, "if you cannot take my things I won't go. Miklos would never give them up, and I should lose them altogether. Besides," she added, "with the frost and snow we now have it would be quite impossible to ride anyhow; I could not ride thirty-five miles to the railway station, and the horses would slip more than if they were harnessed." This latter argument seemed to me a much better one than any she had previously used, and on considering the matter I admitted that we could get over the ground as quickly in a carriage as on horseback, and of course much more comfortably for her. In fact, there is no doubt that, good horsewoman though she was, she could hardly have ridden the distance required at the speed necessary in the middle of a winter night. It was finally decided that on the coming Thursday, while Miklos was indulging in the nap he took daily after dinner, the attempt should be made; but even as I took leave of her she said, "Perhaps we had better give it up," and I had to remain and argue for another ten minutes before she promised to be ready and have everything prepared.'

It was early morning before I reached home and threw myself exhausted on to my bed. I was awakened about nine o'clock by the entry of my French friend.

"Get up," said he, "I want to speak to you. So far I have held my tongue because I thought you were merely amusing yourself in a harmless way, and that what reached my ears was only idle gossip, but now it appears there is something worse in the wind. Everybody in the village is saying that you are spooning young Count Miklos's mistress, and that he intends to kill you. For goodness sake, my dear fellow, be careful. What are you about? Don't risk your life for the sake of some pretty face, no prettier, I dare say, than a dozen others you might have for the asking. These Hungarians don't understand jokes, and from all I hear, Miklos is a regular brute. I should not so much mind if he were likely to call you out and fight you like a man, but I fear that you will be shot at from behind some hedge, like your landlords in Ireland."

All this was said while I was performing my toilet, and of course not uninterruptedly, as I am here stating it, but was the gist of his remarks. Reflecting that I wanted an ally, and that no one could suit me better than the plucky little Frenchman, I unfolded my plan to him and asked his assistance. As soon as he heard the story in full, which was not till I had nearly finished breakfast, he became almost as enthusiastic as I was, although he had never seen Ilka in his life.

"Now," he said, "you will want your whole team of four horses to run off with this young lady, for you will have to go at full gallop through the Lunka Pass and right down into this place. When your team have done their eight miles as fast as they can go, you ought to have fresh horses, and the second change will scarcely take you to the railway-station. I tell you what, you shall have my four. I will send them on to Hatseg (a place twelve miles up the Sebin towards the railway). Thus you are bound to beat the count, even if he should start in pursuit soon after you. If you manage it properly, the fellow won't wake till you are ten miles off, for he generally snores for a couple of

hours, as it appears; but better be on the safe side and prepared for all eventualities. When is it to come off?"

Having informed him of the date, we went to our respective work, and the next few evenings were spent in active but silent preparations.

VI.

On the appointed day, about five o'clock, as the darkness was rapidly concealing everything in her wings, my horses were standing in the yard ready for the expedition. They were harnessed to my Hungarian carriage, which I have already described, and having been kept fresh for the occasion, were pawing the ground with impatience. With my French friend M. Jacques I carefully examined every strap of the harness, overhauled the traces, convinced myself that the axles were greased, the wheels firm, and everything in fact in perfect order. Except Jacques, only Janos knew of the proposed expedition. To him I had been obliged to confide it, as without him it would have been impossible to carry it out. Istvan was a mere machine, would obey any orders I gave him, and would, if I had so directed, drive his team straight into the deep and rapid river flowing round us. He was the boldest if not the safest whip in Transylvania, and had often driven at full gallop across places which in England would scarcely have been attempted, even at a foot's pace, by any sane coachman. M. Jacques remained in the yard, which had hitherto had but one entrance, so that if a carriage was observed to enter it by the gate, no one in the village would have imagined it possible that it could get out again except by the same gate. Jacques, however, had suggested opening a second aperture as a possible convenience, for this occasion only. At the far end of the garden, which was surrounded by a high wattle fence, was a very dirty back slum, which after several meanderings, led into the road up the Sebin. Axe in hand, M. Jacques proceeded to cut down just enough of this fence to enable a carriage to pass into the slum if required. Meanwhile I started on my

journey. It was impossible to drive by the mountain path, and it was now quite dark, so I courageously took the high road, ascended the dangerous Lunka pass, turned up the lane leading to Count Miklos's house, and only pulled up when I arrived within a few hundred yards of his gate. Here, rather to the astonishment of Istvan, we turned off to the right through the stubble fields, and crossing some dry ditches and various small obstacles, at last stopped on the far edge of the little wood which has been so often mentioned. As previously arranged, Janos then sneaked up on the outside of the fence until he reached a point almost opposite the window of Ilka's room. Here the house was not more than thirty yards from the paling, the interval being filled up with flower beds now frozen and covered with snow. It was unfortunately impossible to bring the carriage to this spot, as a wide ditch intervened, which was too formidable even for a Hungarian conveyance. Ilka had been obliged to put her maid into her confidence, as otherwise she would have been quite unable to remove her "things," to which she appeared to attach greater importance than to liberty and life itself. This confidence, however, was nearly the cause of our ruin. As it was, Janos climbed over the fence, and then gently tapped the casement, which was at once thrown open, and displayed Ilka and the servant endeavouring to lift a huge trunk to the level of the windowsill. After a time which appeared to me interminable, Janos at last appeared at the edge of the wood, dragging the box with the help of the maid, while Ilka followed them, occasionally casting anxious glances behind. So far, although we had wasted much precious time in getting this blessed box over a hundred yards of ground, everything appeared to prosper. The garden enclosure was silent as the grave. The lamp was burning placidly on the table of the dining-room where, as Ilka said, she had left Miklos snoring at the fire. From our position we could distinguish the deers' antlers over the mantelshelf, and could see the occasional flickering of the wood-fire. Lifting the box into the carriage I made Ilka get up and then followed. I silently handed Janos my double-barrelled breech-loader, into which I had stuffed two cartridges

with No. 1. I had my rifle between my knees, and a revolver in my belt, for, although these precautions appeared to me unnecessary, yet Jacques's remarks, and a little incident which had occurred a few days previously, and which I must here pause to relate, had rather shaken my confidence.

The incident was simply this :—I was returning from down the valley towards home, driving steadily along the road, at about six o'clock in the evening. Two figures jumped from out of the ditch, and tried to seize the horses' heads, while others seemed suddenly to emerge from the darkness, and called out to me to stop at once. Of course Istvan took no notice, but drove on rapidly, when two shots followed us, without, however, touching either us or the horses. It was suggested, on my return to the office, that this attack was planned by a gang of idle ruffians, who were aware that on that particular occasion I should have a considerable sum of money by me, and that their intention was solely plunder. Plausible as this explanation appeared, it was not entirely satisfactory. The Wallach peasants would not indeed have hesitated to murder anybody for the sake of a few florins, but I could scarcely imagine that they would band themselves together for the purpose of a highway robbery. Whatever the cause of this attack, its result was that on this particular Thursday evening I neglected no precautions. As soon as we were seated we started. We got safely into the lane, and then I ordered Istvan to put the horses at full gallop. This he did, but before we reached the main road there was an alarm. We heard distant shouts behind us, and, when the tremendous clatter we had made over the frozen ruts of the lane ceased, in consequence of our reaching the comparatively level road, I clearly distinguished the sound of hoofs behind me. The maid must have awakened her master the moment that we had gone. We tore along, however, as fast as the horses could go, Istvan still keeping them well in hand, for the ground was terribly slippery, and, if one of them had fallen, we must all have come to grief. We now began to ascend the Lunka, and, as we went rather more slowly, the pursuers—if pursuers there were

—gained on us. Before attaining the summit, the ascent being the least dangerous part of the road, we heard the tramp of horses and the roll of wheels at no great distance behind us. Then there was a loud shout. I could only distinguish the word "stop," but of course the command was not obeyed. Still the horses' hoofs came nearer and nearer, and at last a shot rang clear and sharp through the cold air. I at once put my rifle at full cock (following Janos's example), when Ilka, placing her hand on my arm, whispered,—

"Don't shoot him. If you do, I shall jump out of the carriage, and never speak to you again."

"But what if he tries to shoot me?" I whispered.

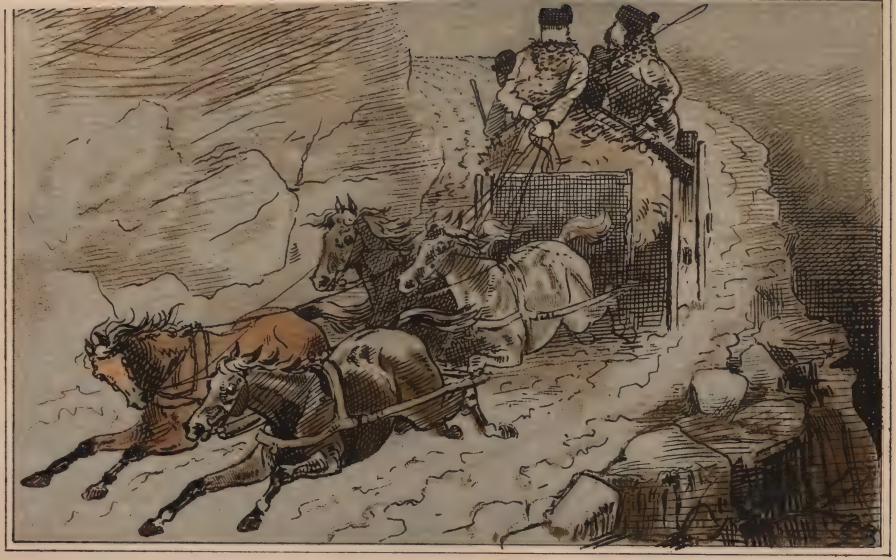
"Oh," she answered, in tones which appeared to me harsh and grating, "there are plenty of other men in the world as good as you, but there is not one so handsome as Miklos."

This was distinctly cheering, when it is recollected that it came from a lady for whose sake I was at that moment risking my life. However, it was not a time to argue about trifles, and, though unwilling to rid the world of so handsome an incumbrance as Miklos, I was still more unwilling to part with my own life without a struggle. I silently determined that I would shoot him before he had the chance of shooting me. Soon there was another shot, and by this time we had reached the top. The descent was steep and winding. On our left was a precipice, at the foot of which ran the boiling river. On our right the rocks rose just as steeply from the road, which was narrow, and completely unprotected by rails or parapet. It was a place where, as a rule, drag and brake were both put on, while the horses went at a foot's pace even in daylight and fine weather. At night, when the ground was covered with snow, Istvan would, under ordinary circumstances, probably have descended from his box and led the two leaders down the hill, Janos, meanwhile, holding up the team from the coachman's position. But now we could not hesitate. Down we tore at headlong speed. The drag was on, and the carriage slid sideways after the horses, who appeared to be alternately on their haunches

and their knees. Just then a horseman galloped up. He was alongside the carriage before we had seen his approach.

"What do you mean," shouted he, "you damned Englishman, by running away with the Count's young lady?" and at the same time he fired straight at the coachman. It appeared to be a revolver, or other pistol. At any rate his aim was unsteady, and though we heard the whistle of the bullet, no one was hurt. I never saw any man cooler than Janos, for before our assailant had had time to fire another shot, he levelled his gun with absolute calmness, and discharged both barrels almost simultaneously straight into the horse. As the animal felt the second shot it reared up in the air, and, with loud Hungarian curses, the rider rolled to the edge of the precipice. To my horror, for I was looking back, he disappeared over it, but, as the Hungarians climb like cats, and hold on by their feet like monkeys, no doubt the fellow eventually escaped. During this little episode our speed had rather slackened, for Istvan, with intuitive perception of what was required of him, had held the horses well up, and thus enabled Janos to shoot. He also gave him time to reload, and then, as the carriage-wheels behind us were coming nearer and nearer, he let them go again, and we tore round the sharp curves of the road and slid crosswise along the steep slopes with a speed I shall never forget, and in a manner which makes me tremble to think of even now. At every moment I thought that we must certainly be upset. As we grazed corner after corner of the projecting rocks, I expected at every instant to be shot violently over the precipice. With one hand I clung to the bar of the carriage, with the other I held Ilka round the waist. She, however, seemed well able to take care of herself, and, after her request to me to spare Miklos's life, she never opened her lips. Before we had completed the perilous descent another bullet whistled past my ears just between my head and Ilka's. An inch to the right or left, and it must have killed one of us on the spot.

"Now," I said, "you see he does not think of sparing your life. Why should you want to spare his?"



"At every moment I thought we must certainly be upset."

"Quite right too," she answered, almost in a whisper. "He loves me as I want to be loved. He would rather shoot me than that I should belong to any one else."

Now, however, it was too late to dally. We could already see the leaders of Miklos's team behind us. Though scarcely gaining on us, they were not more than fifty yards distant, and, if the Count was well supplied with breech-loading ammunition, he was almost bound to shoot us, or, at any rate, one of us, before I reached my station. Turning round, therefore, I knelt down at the bottom of the carriage, leant one elbow on the seat, and deliberately raised the "express" rifle. It was a moment or two before I could cover the horses, which were indistinct in the darkness, and difficult to aim at in consequence of the jolts of the carriage. While I was still trying to do so another shot came. The bullet hit the back of the trap with a bang which threw everyone forward. It splintered the light wood, and, as I afterwards discovered, it lodged in the bag of oats under the coachman's box. I fired, but apparently without any result. I fired again; this time one of the horses dropped, and our pursuers came to a standstill. I had aimed very low, trying if possible to injure one of the animals, and without any thought of hurting either Count Miklos or his driver. We were now comparatively safe; we had gained the level, and were tearing at full gallop into the village. With a yell of delight Istvan whipped his horses round a sharp corner into the yard, and pulled up before my house. Another carriage was standing ready with four fresh animals carefully covered from the night winds by English horse-cloths. There was a man at the side of each leader; another coachman, less bold, perhaps, but quite as good a driver as Istvan, on the box. A dozen hands were at once ready to help us out. Ilka's trunk was pushed into the new vehicle. We ascended, and, turning to Istvan, I said "Now, turn out of the yard, and drive along the road down the valley as if you were going to Haromseg." At the same time Monsieur Jacques got up on the carriage we had just left, but Istvan did not seem to understand his orders. "Drive this

gentleman down the Haromseg Road," I repeated, "and take your orders from him." He did not yet seem to comprehend, and did not obey until Janos cursed him in good Hungarian, asking the fool if he did not see what I wanted. What I wanted was simple enough. Ilka and I dashed off in the new carriage with the fresh horses, through the aperture M. Jacques had cut in the fence. We thus got into the Sebin road by the back slums, but M. Jacques, with my carriage, turned out of the yard by the great gate, and all the villagers of course thought that I had proceeded on my way down the valley, since none of them knew that I had opened a new road of retreat that evening. Thus when Miklos came up, having got rid of his two leaders, and furiously enquired of the affrighted peasants, who had run out of their houses, which way the Englishman had driven, all pointed towards Haromseg, and away he rushed after Monsieur Jacques, who had a start of about ten minutes of him in consequence of the delay on the mountain side with the wounded horses. When fired at, which was not until he had covered at least five miles, Jacques immediately pulled up and waited for the Count to come up to him.

"Where the deuce is the Englishman?" screamed out Miklos, "and where is the young lady? Who are you, you hound?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir," was the quiet answer of Jacques; "I am driving down to Haromseg on business, and you fire at me in this unjustifiable manner. I know nothing of the Englishman nor of any young lady. Where do you come from?"

Miklos was disgusted. His men recognised Istvan, but what could they do? Istvan answered every question by the favourite Hungarian evasive reply "I don't know." Wild horses would not have torn a secret of mine from his bosom.

"Why did the Englishman lend you his horses?" screamed Miklos.

"He often does so," was Jacques' quiet reply. "You know I am also an engineer. Will you now let me go on without firing at me?"

"Go to the devil, you hound," answered Miklos, turning his

horses' heads and galloping wildly back towards the village, and M. Jacques, having ascertained that the enemy was out of sight, quietly jogged on to the nearest public-house, where, having rubbed down my horses, washed their mouths out, and refreshed Istvan's inner man, he turned and walked them slowly towards home. Meanwhile I had got a tremendous start of Count Miklos. I felt sure that Jacques's *ruse* would succeed, but still I thought it better to lose no time. We had nearly thirty miles to cover, and the road was atrociously bad. Still every mile took us further and further from the Count's influence, and I felt that even without half-an-hour's start my fresh horses would surely beat his weary ones. The drive to the town where M. Jacques had stationed another team was quite devoid of incident. We went on as fast as we could, still the road was very rough and so hilly that it was ten o'clock before we reached the hostelry. It was now high time to obtain some refreshment for Ilka; she was almost blue with cold, perfectly motionless, and had not spoken a word for the last two hours. Her limbs were so rigid that we had to lift her out of the carriage like an inanimate object. We took her into the parlour, which fortunately was unoccupied, and the kind landlady at once began chafing her numbed limbs. She soon revived, and I persuaded her to take a glass of stiff grog, which I mixed myself, after the most approved Yorkshire fashion. Still I dared not tarry long, for though this little town was some distance from Count Miklos's estate, I did not wish to have a *fracas* in the hotel, nor possibly to have to defend Ilka's liberty at the cost of my life or some one else's; so I asked her whether we should proceed, and she answered "Yes," stolidly. I procured a hot-water bottle, which I placed under her feet, helped her into the carriage, and drove off. I was anxious to catch the mail train which passed through the station, fifteen miles off, at one a.m. On this stage Ilka became more talkative.

"Do you think," she asked, "that we are safe?"

"Quite safe," I answered. "I do not think there is the slightest chance of his ever catching us up."

"But," she said, "supposing we miss the train and he finds us at the railway station?"

"Well," said I, "there there are *gendarmes* and Austrian officials, and surely you do not imagine that Count Miklos can force you to return against your will when once we are out of the hands of his ruffianly peasantry?"

"Oh," she said, "Count Miklos has a long arm; there is not one so great and so powerful."

"Indeed," I remarked, "I am very much surprised at hearing you say that; I have just proved to you that there is some one who is not afraid to defy Count Miklos, and to do so successfully."

Still she trembled. She had not shown any signs of alarm during the whole exciting evening, but now I suppose the reaction had come. Feeling quite secure myself, I was able to devote myself to conversation, and I described to her the influence of the law, the proceedings in Courts of Justice, and all the regulations of civilized life, which I thought would have a reassuring effect.

"Now," I said, "surely if I stand by you, and you see two *gendarmes* on either side, you will not be afraid even if Count Miklos claims you?"

"No," she said, "I think not; but I don't know."

"You will stand by me, will you not?" she continued, clutching my arm.

"Why, of course," I said, "how can you doubt it?"

"You will not desert me when we get to the train? I am afraid of going by myself."

This question very much disconcerted me. I had been anxious to hand her over to the guard after telegraphing to her father to expect her at a station further on, where the train was due in the morning, for urgent business required my presence at home. I meekly suggested this plan.

"No," she said, passionately, "No, no! I would rather go back to Miklos. I cannot trust anybody but you. You must take me to my father's. You would not leave me alone and

unprotected? Why, Count Miklos might stop the train and take me away."

It was impossible to argue with a being so frightened and so *naïve*. The reign of terror through which she had passed had evidently impressed her imagination to such an extent that she could scarcely conceive of any force strong enough to resist her lover's power. So I consented to accompany her, and fortunately for all of us we reached the station half an hour before the train was expected, for the slippery state of the rails had somewhat delayed it. I felt that this half hour could not possibly enable Count Miklos to reach us, because his tired horses, now reduced to two, would have been at the best exchanged only for two post-horses at the half-way inn. So, perfectly reassured, I procured some hot coffee for my charge, made her lay her feet up on the hard chairs which were the only furniture in the desolate waiting-room, took two first-class tickets for her father's place, and sent away Monsieur Jacques' coachman with a handsome reward. Janos accompanied him with orders to return the next evening with my own horses from the half-way house to take me home. Soon the train came up, and when we got into the comfortable carriage, far superior to any of those seen in civilized England, well lighted and well warmed, I at least felt that all danger was over.

VII.

On our way Ilka at last thawed both physically and mentally. "I believe you now," she exclaimed. "You know I never believed you before. You assured me you could take me away from Count Miklos. You said that he would not hurt me. You promised that I should be free, you swore that you would defend me; but many others have done so before you, and long before the time came they have gone to play cards with Miklos and were afraid of risking a quarrel for my sake. Until now I doubted whether you would or could save me. I thought you would be frightened. I felt sure Miklos would shoot you if

you were not, but I now see that you are stronger than Miklos. I never thought there was so much strength in so small a man."

Flattering as this speech was, I felt rather hurt at its conclusion, for I did not imagine myself to be at all undersized. But I was in fact very short in comparison to Count Miklos. However, I recovered my composure and assured her that an Englishman's word was sacred, and that if he promised something he would always do his best to perform it. I gave my countrymen, I confess, rather too good a character, but I certainly succeeded in impressing my companion with a very high estimate of English fortitude, for to her simple mind Miklos had always appeared nothing short of a demi-god. To meet a GENTLEMAN, who was not afraid of Miklos, whose manners were not those of the barbarians surrounding her, and who knew more of the world, and could tell her more amusing tales, than all the rest of the people she had ever met put together, was to her little short of a miracle.

"I really believe I am safe," she said at last; "Will he not come and fetch me back again?"

"No," I said, "certainly not, if you are with your father and refuse to follow him."

"I think I am safe," she said again, and at last, putting her arms round my neck, she burst into a violent flood of tears. I tried to soothe her, for she was wearied out and excited by the events of the night, but at first to no purpose. She fell on her knees at the bottom of the carriage, and embracing my feet called me her guardian-angel, she smothered me with kisses, rather, I fear, of gratitude than of love. She began sentences only to break them off, and after laughing loudly would suddenly again begin weeping. In short she was perfectly hysterical. After much trouble, I succeeded in getting the poor girl to lie down at full length on the comfortable seat. Covering her with all the rugs and furs I could muster, I advised her to try and sleep, and at last her weary eyelids closed. I was still too excited myself to be able to follow her example, but at last I also fell into an uneasy slumber, from which I was only roused by the friendly and very obsequious guard opening the door and saying that this was

our station. On the platform was an elderly red-faced man of highly respectable appearance enveloped in a huge fur, and accompanied by a spare and excessively handsome, if elderly woman, whose gait and carriage strongly resembled Ilka's. There was no mistake—these must be her parents.

I at once went up to them while the guard was helping the girl out. They recognized her almost before she had placed her foot on the platform, although the dawn was not yet breaking, and the next moment I found myself smothered in the embraces of the grey-bearded old gentleman, who notwithstanding my struggles refused to leave off kissing me on both cheeks alternately. His wife then began kissing my hand after having given her daughter a good hug. The poor girl seemed still quite dazed with the change of scene; but between us we managed to make her smile, and in the waiting-room, before a crowd of admiring people, while her parents looked on approvingly, she tossed off her cloak and throwing her arms round my neck, kissed me effusively, calling me her God-sent deliverer. This to a shy Englishman was a little trying. I was extremely fond of the girl, but I did not wish to be made a spectacle of in public. However, nothing would satisfy her but that I should come home with her and her parents, and, in fact, they would have been mortally offended if I had not done so. The best room was placed at my disposal. Ilka herself waited on me with an attention which was more than touching, for it was inconvenient. She never thought of her own fatigue, but from the moment I crossed her father's threshold did nothing but inquire for my wants, and consult with her parents as to how she should gratify them, or any eccentric fancy I might take into my head. I left these good people the same afternoon, advising them strongly to send their daughter to a good school at Pest or Vienna, where her excellent abilities might be developed, and where she could feel herself entirely beyond the reach of Count Miklos.

Strictly speaking, my story is at an end, but I may as well add what were its consequences. On my returning to the half-

way-house I was greeted at the threshold by my friend Jacques.

"Oh," he said, "such a magnificent lark. What do you think? Miklos got here somewhere about two in the morning. He roused up the whole house. His horses were nearly dead, and he inquired whether an Englishman had come through. 'Yes,' replied the landlady, he came through with his wife.' 'With his wife,' yelled Miklos. 'Yes,' said the landlady, 'I suppose it was his wife; at any rate they appeared very fond of each other. 'Fond of each other!' shouted Miklos at the top of his voice. 'The devils! how could I ever be such a fool as to receive that fiend of an Englishman? He has killed my best horse, two others are more than half dead, and he has taken away my only jewel, my Ilka.' But," continued Jacques, "even Miklos was not such a fool as to push on to the station all through the night. He knew the train was gone, and his chance with it, but you should have seen him to-day when I drove up here while his horses were resting. He recognised me in an instant, and looked at me as if he would slaughter me there and then, but as I had done nothing, I simply bowed and said, 'How do you do, Count Miklos?' and walked into the inn, and here I am."

"When did he go?" I inquired.

"Late last night," said he. "His horses were so knocked up that he had to leave them here, and he went back in a hired conveyance."

"Well," I remarked, "I suppose I shall have to fight a duel."

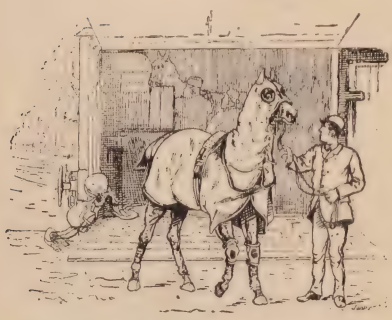
"I hope not," answered Jacques, "but if you do, you know where to find a friend."

We drove back together. Count Miklos had, it appears, serious thoughts of challenging me, but my friends Hunyadi and Barczy prevented his doing so. Hunyadi argued, so he afterwards told me, that Miklos had treated the girl so badly that it served him right that she should leave him. Besides, my immediate reappearance in my station, alone, and the reports which I took care should reach the Count, that Ilka had returned

to her parents, made it impossible for any honourable man to carry a hostile message from Miklos to me. Much to his disgust he was obliged to drop the matter, and his father took the first opportunity of himself thanking me for having removed the girl from his son's influence. What became of Miklos eventually I do not know. No doubt he is now married and living on his ancestral estates.

Ilka was sent to school at Vienna. She afterwards married there, is now the mother of a large family of blooming children, and never omits to send me a Christmas card and a charming letter as each successive year draws to a close.

THE SOUTH LOAMSHIRE HOUNDS.



I.

"FREE at last!" exclaimed Percy Fitzclarence, as the train steamed out of the huge station at St. Pancras. "Free, and the whole world before me! What a blessing to get away! Now for a quiet pipe and a good think." Thus soliloquising in a tone which would have been audible if there had been any one there to listen, he proceeded to make himself thoroughly comfortable. He was surrounded by bags, rugs, and the morning papers, but having carefully stowed away a portly leather-strapped case, about which he seemed very particular, and wrapped himself well up in the rug, he left the literature unnoticed on the seat. For his thoughts were a sufficiently absorbing occupation.

What their nature was may be guessed from a brief account of Percy's past life. He had not always been Percy Fitzclarence. What his former name was we need not now stop to enquire; suffice it to say that his new one was more aristocratic. His father, a gentleman whose pursuits were lucrative rather than distinguished, had died about a year back, leaving his business and the bulk of his property to Percy's elder brother. A few thousand strictly tied up, and another five hundred in cash,

were the portion of the younger son. With this limited capital, and a very little occasional help from his mother, who was scarcely better off, Percy determined to make his fortune. He could have remained in the business, of which his elder brother was willing to give him a small share, but the two years he had spent as assistant to his father since he had left school had thoroughly disgusted him with this road to affluence. His early years had been spent abroad, where he had learnt more of Greek and Latin, but less of cricket, than he would have done at Eton or Harrow; then, before he joined his father, he spent some time as the private pupil of a clergyman in the South of England. Here the deficiencies of his foreign training had been amply made up, for his time was spent in riding, shooting, cricket, and tennis, according to the season; and three years had developed in him a strong passion for field sports, more especially for hunting and everything which pertains to horses. Percy was quick in body and mind, and had not only acquired an excellent seat and light hands, but had also become a very fair judge of a horse, and not likely to be taken in by the first acute coper. His fellow pupils, mostly sons of country gentlemen of good fortune, and his master, an ardent disciple of the muscular Christian school, had improved his manners and encouraged him in his newly-acquired love of sport; no wonder therefore that he pined in the confined atmosphere of a London office, and in less than a month hated the life which was forced upon him. Hence arose angry discussions with his father; hence, probably, did he find his patrimony so much smaller than he thought he had a right to expect. The will left him this sum and no more, but recommended Percy's elder brother to give him a considerable share in the business if he would attend to it. Our hero, however—for though he be unheroic, he *is* our hero—resolutely declined the offer, and his brother saw no reason for making any sacrifices to one with whom he had but little sympathy. Percy had decided to follow his own bent—and this bent took him away from London into the Midlands, a part of England which had always been his Promised Land.

How, with an income of one hundred and fifty pounds a year and some loose cash, he was going to keep the four hunters and the covert-hack which he had "boxed" by the slow train just before taking his own seat in the express, is a problem which troubled him less than might be supposed. He had unlimited confidence in his own resources and in the gifts of Destiny. We will not call him a fatalist, for his philosophy was but superficial; rather might he be compared to Micawber, trusting in something turning up. Only there was this difference between Percy and Dickens's hero, that the former was willing to plan, contrive, and work hard in order to achieve what he wanted—a competence and a good social position—and would not fold his hands and wait idly for Fortune to shower her gifts upon him. He was ready to summon her to his aid by every legitimate means, and perhaps by some which would scarcely appear quite legitimate to strait-laced people. Meanwhile he had four good horses, a fair balance at his bankers, a good head-groom, and, above all, excellent health and spirits. So the immediate future did not trouble him much, notwithstanding his ulterior plans for achieving greatness.

It is time to describe Percy's appearance, at least briefly, for otherwise his story might scarcely inspire the interest which the tale of a virtuous (sports-)man struggling with difficulties always deserves. He was slightly above the middle height, broad shouldered, well built, spare, and muscular; he had dark brown eyes, short curly chestnut hair, a wide white forehead, and a distinctly aquiline nose. The lower part of his face was covered by a soft beard and moustache, which he never allowed to grow beyond very limited proportions. The mouth was, possibly, the worst of his features, but then it was almost hidden and therefore unobjectionable. He possessed excellent white teeth, broad and strong but not large hands, and very small feet, and he dressed carefully, though he professed rather to follow the fashion from a distance than to be in its van. On the whole, therefore, he was decidedly good-looking, and it was singular that his good looks rather grew upon his acquaintances. Friendly

"Percy had ridden him to hounds while at his Tutor's."

familiarity seemed to bring out his good points, strangers being seldom struck by them.

Having described Percy, it may be as well to clear the ground by devoting a few words to his stud. It consisted, as we have said, of five. There was, first of all, an old Irish horse, which he had kept surreptitiously during the whole time of his confinement in London, and had ridden wildly about Hampstead and other remote places on the long summer evenings. No hunter understood his work better than old Land League, a goose-rumped, bony black from Kildare. He was not particularly fast, but Percy had ridden him to hounds while at his tutor's, and knew that no jump was too big and no place too awkward for him. His forelegs, however, were beginning to show signs of age, and he could not stand two hard days a week.

Next came Kismet, a more recent purchase. This was a thorough-bred, who was sent to Tattersall's out of a racing stable for not being fast enough. In the summer which had just drawn to a close Percy, who had systematically spent every Saturday afternoon at Albert-gate, had been struck by his looks and breeding, and resolved to invest a portion of his loose legacy in the purchase of the then unnamed four-year-old. Having been dismally beaten in a couple of minor handicaps, the colt fetched only a very moderate sum, and his new owner devoted much care and attention to schooling him during all the time which was available. He promised well, and took kindly to jumping, but was as yet comparatively raw. Percy, however, rode steadily, and did not pull eleven stone in his walking clothes; Kismet was therefore likely to have every chance, as he had capital legs, good wind, and plenty of action; the investment of fifty guineas seemed to be turning out judicious.

The two other hunters were mares: Destiny and Fortune. Destiny was as thoroughbred as Kismet: a splendid jumper, fast, and safe; but she "rushed" a little, and had marked her off-knee, a clumsy stable-lad having thrown her down at exercise. Percy had bought her for thirty-five pounds out of a team at the end of the season, during which she had been driven six

months as leader. Fortune could not boast of an unblemished pedigree; she had been recommended to Percy by his former tutor, who had seen her grow up from a foal in a neighbouring farm. She was strong, sound, and handsome; her only fault being a largish head. Fortune stood sixteen hands, and was up to fourteen stone, but being only "five off" could scarcely yet be called a perfect hunter. This was the most expensive of Percy's speculations in horse-flesh; she had cost eighty guineas.

The last of the stud was the pony Omnibus; a rattling good bay, seven years old, and about fourteen-two. This animal could trot any number of miles an hour, either in harness or under a heavy weight; jumped like a cat, cantered pleasantly, and was never sick nor sorry. Omnibus had come out of the cart of a bankrupt butcher in the North of London, and had cost thirteen pounds. But he was then in the poorest condition, over-worked, half-starved, unkempt, dirty, and neglected; now he was sleek, well groomed, and as fresh as a two-year-old.

A small village cart for Omnibus to draw, and the necessary clothes and saddlery, completed the outfit which was sent down to Drayboro' on that November morning.

II.

It will have been seen that Percy Fitzclarence had not been too proud to devote a good deal of time and trouble to the purchase of his horses. He was not the man to go into a dealer's yard, and buy, at the dealer's price, any animal that appeared to suit him. He was willing to work and wait to get a chance of buying a good one cheap, and as he did not mind a blemish or two, as long as the horse was practically sound, and could jump as well as gallop, he generally succeeded in his object. He had only made one mistake, and was sensible enough to send his purchase to Aldridge's the moment he discovered that the horse was afflicted with fever in the feet, preferring the immediate loss to the remote chance of curing him. With this exception, all had so far turned out as well almost as he could wish, but the

new ones had not hitherto been tried in the hunting-field. Percy had selected Drayboro as his head-quarters, although it was by no means a very fashionable hunting centre. The packs within reach were not strictly speaking "metropolitan." Our hero did not like crowds of hard riders among whom his own bold riding might pass unnoticed. He was very fond of hunting, but preferred it with a little honour and glory; honour and glory he felt he would hardly attain in the ruck with the Pytchley. Though a firm believer in Luck, Destiny, or Fate (as indeed his horses' names testified), he thought that a fool did not deserve good fortune, and determined not to be a bigger fool than he could help. In fact, to use the phraseology of his own soliloquies, he did not care to start against a big field of crack riders and rich men. Now he had ascertained beyond a doubt that he could hunt five days a week from Drayboro, that there were plenty of "good people" in the neighbourhood, and that London men spending the season there were not numerous.

It was luncheon time when a rumbly fly set him down at the Royal William Hotel, where his arrival was expected, and the usual substantial county town lunch prepared. But Percy was not the man to think of himself first and his horses afterwards. The latter were for him *le moyen de parvenir*, so their wants were, in his eyes, far more important than his own. Mr. Lambert, the host of the Royal William, greeted the new arrival effusively, for Percy had already arranged to occupy two rooms and five loose boxes for a month at least, with the option of remaining during the season, and he had been careful to send a handsome cheque on account in lieu of references. Hence Mr. Fitzclarence was favourably known before he appeared, and Mr. Lambert's staff was as obsequious as Mr. Lambert himself. Quite a host of followers accompanied him on his visit of inspection to the stables.

"They will do very well, Mr. Lambert," said he at last, turning to the landlord, who was rubbing his hands, "but they are stuffy. Please send for a bricklayer at once."

"A bricklayer?" asked the astonished host.

"Yes. I want a couple of bricks out just below the ceiling in every loose box. Don't be afraid," he continued, smiling, "I

don't want to pull your stables down. A handy man will do the job in an hour; but the fact is, the place wants ventilation. I will pay for it, and will have them put back again when I go, if you don't find out by that time that it's an improvement."

Percy then explained to the somewhat rustic Lambert that modern hunting stables were scarcely consistent with an absence of air, and that excessive heat, though it might improve the horses' coats, was sure to injure their wind and eyes. Then the bricklayer having arrived and received his instructions, the magic of another small cheque on account was sufficient to induce even the British workman to get through an hour's job in the course of an afternoon. By the time the slow train reached Drayboro everything was ready, and Percy saw the horses made thoroughly comfortable.

There was no one in the hotel except in the commercial room. A couple of hunting gentlemen, said Lambert, would arrive next week, but for the present Percy had it all to himself, for of course, strangers who merely stopped at Drayboro for a night on their way to some other place, were not taken into account. This solitariness rather suited our hero, as he was thus able to reconnoitre his ground, and find out who was who before any inquisitive sportsman could disturb him. It was the most natural thing in the world therefore that he should ask Mr. Lambert to join him after dinner in a bottle of the best and oldest port the Royal William could produce. Percy hated port, it made him bilious and increased his weight; but there were occasions on which he could sip it, and this was one. Hunting maps of the country were brought out and consulted, and Mr. Lambert gave him all the information he could about the meets, the best fox coverts, the shortest bridle roads, and everything which could interest a sportsman. That he should also talk of the gentry and larger farmers of the neighbourhood, was a matter of course, and as the conversation proceeded, a third person might have noticed that Percy appeared more interested in the local magnates and their families, than in the runs which had been enjoyed from this wood or that copse. A name which very soon cropped up in Mr. Lambert's talk, was that of Lord Sevenoaks. When he had mentioned it once or twice, Percy remarked casually:—

"Lord Sevenoaks? I think I have heard of him. Earl of Sevenoaks, is he not?"

"Yes, sir," answered his host, "and a very fine old nobleman he is; wouldn't hurt a fly if he could help it. And a beautiful place, too, is Joscelyn Park."

"Let me see," said Percy, with the air of a man thoroughly uninterested in the subject, "he's an old bachelor, is he not?"

"Old bachelor, sir? Bless your heart, no. He's got a very fine son, sir, Lord Algy, we call him, though his name is Algernon. And there's Lady Maud, a pretty young lady, surely; and another one, Lady Georgina. She's a bonnie lass, too, though she's only a wee one."

Now Percy knew very well, from the peerage, that the Earl of Sevenoaks had three children; but he wanted to know something more which the peerage did not tell him, so he went on:

"And do any of the gentlemen about here ride very hard, Mr. Lambert?"

"Well, sir, it's mostly the farmer's sons and that sort, when they're making their young 'osses, that ride the hardest, barring officers from the depôt up at Scantlefort. But there's Lord Algy, he rides, sure enough; and there's young Mr. Fielding, and Captain Wentworth, he's a fairish rider, too."

"I think I know Mr. Fielding," said Percy, "a small dark man, very thin indeed?"

"No sir, just the other way. It won't be the same as you know, then. Mr. Fielding is a fine-looking, big gentleman, but rides well and has first-rate cattle. He buys them in London; his father is the rich Mr. Fielding the banker, and he lets his son spend as much as he likes. He lives at Craysfoot, just outside the town, but the young gentleman don't trouble the bank much. He's mostly riding to hounds, or driving over to call on the ladies."

"Ah!" remarked Percy; "and does Captain Wentworth often come to your place?"

"Well, you see, sir, he don't come as often as he used to. They *do* say he's after Lady Maud, and that's why he don't come here as he did last year. Bless your heart, there wasn't an

afternoon last winter (except may be when hounds ran right the other way), that Captain Wentworth didn't come in and have something in the bar room by the fire, and talk to Polly (that's the barmaid, as you know, sir), and was quite pleasant like. He used to sit there sometimes for hours a-warming his toes, till I wondered that the fire didn't crack his boots. And it's only last month that he told us about Farmer Marchmont's hare. Did you ever hear tell that tale, Mr. Fitzclarence?"

Mr. Fitzclarence had not heard the tale, and suggested another bottle of port for Mr. Lambert to wet his throat with while telling it. We will however spare our readers the infliction he endured with exemplary patience. When it was over, and Mr. Lambert had recovered the violent fit of horse laughter his own story produced, Percy observed:

"A capital story that is, Mr. Lambert, a very good tale indeed. Ha, ha! and does not Captain Wentworth tell you any more good stories now? I should like to hear another of his," he added, with a somewhat wry face.

"No, sir, he's mostly up at Joscelyn Park now. We've lost a very pleasant gentleman, sir, a very pleasant gentleman indeed."

"I suppose he's after Lady Maud's money?" hazarded Percy as a guess.

"Bless you, sir, no, he's got plenty of his own. Not but what Lady Maud will have a fine property too, forty thousand pounds I hear them say, in stocks or what not, besides the outlying farms what belonged to her mother. But Captain Wentworth, sir, he's a sort of cousin of his lordship's, he's very rich indeed; why, they say he could buy Joscelyn Park twice over. His trustees, they tell me, bought property near London when he was a hinfant, and it's grown so fast, it's worth ten times the money now."

"Lucky man!" exclaimed Percy, very sincerely.

"You may say so, sir," continued the garrulous landlord, "but they say he ain't quite so lucky in love as in land. Somehow, I can't quite make that thing out yet. A grand wedding it 'ud be, to be sure! Why I believe they'd take all my house and

stables for a week for their friends' servants, let alone the grand people that 'ud come down."

"Is the day fixed?" inquired Percy.

"No, sir, nor is it likely to be, somehow. Some say it's on, and some say it's off; and nather seems to be right. I fancy the young lady don't quite take to him. You see they've growd up together almost like brother and sister, and I've often noticed that when two young people have know'd each other so long there's generally one of them that knows the other too well to care about marrying."

"I dare say you are right," replied Percy, amused with Mr. Lambert's philosophy. "Then are the two of the same age?"

"Not quite that; Captain Wentworth may be six or seven years older. I remember Lady Maud wore short frocks when he first came here in his regimentals. Guards, I think he was in. But however, they've seen plenty of each other all their lives, and *my* opinion is, that Lady Maud don't want to see no more of him. But howsomedever, I may be wrong, sir, and I hope you won't say you heard anything from me, sir. I've no business rightly to be talking about my betters."

"You are quite safe, Mr. Lambert; *I* shan't tell. It is not my business, you know, and I don't care about it. But I am very glad to hear your good stories, and should like to hear more. Have another glass of wine? It's first rate."

"Glad you like it, sir," answered Lambert, "but I could not take any more. I've drunk a bottle as it is."

In fact he had drunk two bottles all but a glass. But he could stand it better than Percy.

"Just a brandy and soda then to finish," suggested the latter, and this being agreed to, they sat down again. "Forty thousand pounds did you say?" asked Percy reflectively.

"What, sir? Oh, Lady Maud's fortin; yes, so I've heard. You see the late countess's will was all over the place, there was no secret, and all her ladyship's money was settled on herself, and Lord Algy, of course he would have plenty, so the young ladies have got it between them; but Dr. Biggs, he knows the exact figure."

"Well," said Percy, "never mind. It's of no interest to me, but I hope some beggarly rascal won't come down and snap one of them up."

"So do I, sir," echoed Lambert warmly, "but I don't think there's much fear of that. His lordship and Dr. Biggs look after them too well."

"Who's Dr. Biggs?" asked Percy.

"He's our old doctor, sir, and a very clever man too. Her ladyship the countess made him trustee or executor, or whatever they call it. He lives just across the way, sir, and you'll often see his son ride to hounds, with his little sister sometimes on a pony. Well sir, it's getting late, and I must look after the bar. Good night, sir, and thank you kindly."

"Thank *you* for your pleasant company," answered Percy, standing up and shaking hands cordially with his host. "I should have been very lonely without you."

"Good night," again said Lambert, bowing as he retired.

"What an infernal old bore," exclaimed Percy, as the door closed. "Never mind, he's given me no end of useful tips. I must spot that young Biggs and Fielding, yes, Fielding, Fielding first of all." And he went to bed well satisfied with his evening.

III.

The next was not a hunting day. Percy, having satisfied himself that the horses were all fresh and well, having examined their legs, looked at their feet, sniffed at the hay, and carefully tested the corn provided for them, went down the market-place to find some cleaner and heavier oats, and only when he had attended to all these matters thought of his own breakfast. When he had done full justice to the repast, he went round to the stable again and ordered Omnibus to be put into the dog-cart; then, having made a careful but unassuming toilette, he appeared at the door of the Royal William, carrying that leather case which he had on the previous day so carefully stowed away in the railway carriage.

"Where is Mr. Fielding's bank?" asked he of Miss Polly as he drew on his buckskin driving-gloves.

"Just up the High Street, sir—not more than a quarter of a mile. It's a large red brick house on the left; you can't mistake it."

"Thanks," said Percy.

He might, of course, have walked that quarter of a mile, and let his small, but excessively sharp second horseman, who also performed the functions of valet, carry the case. But for reasons of his own he preferred driving. It had just struck eleven when he pulled up at the double doors, on which the words "Drayboro Bank" appeared on large brass plates.

"Just go in and inquire whether Mr. Fielding is in," he said to his lad, and, when the latter returned with a reply in the affirmative, Percy carried his case into the outer room, where the country clerks, surprised at the smart groom and the fresh face, looked up with some curiosity. Placing his burden on the wide brass-edged counter, he handed his card over it, and politely asked whether he could see Mr. Fielding. One of the young men took it into the bank parlour, and of course did not fail to read it on the way. "Mr. Percy Fitzclarence, 204,

Ryder Street, St. James's, S.W.'—that was all. The youth returned, and, holding open the door of the inner sanctum, beckoned Percy to go in. He followed the sign, requesting the clerk to take care of his case until he returned, "for," said he, "it contains a lot of property."

At a wide table, covered with papers, in a comfortable arm-chair, sat a thoroughly respectable-looking elderly gentleman, the ideal of a country banker. His face looked the very picture of health, good temper, and joviality; only occasional quick glances of his small grey eyes betrayed the sharp man of business. He was twisting Percy's card about in his fingers.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he inquired, with a slight tinge of acidity in his tone; for no doubt the worthy gentleman had been more than once asked for temporary loans by flashy young men with high-sounding names, and did not want to have the pain of refusing another application.

"Well, Mr. Fielding, I have come to you without a formal introduction, but I have one open here to the Drayboro Branch of the English and Transatlantic Bank, Limited, and perhaps you will be good enough to look at it," answered Percy, handing the banker a letter.

He glanced at its contents. It was a printed form, introducing Mr. Percy Fitzclarence as a customer of the head establishment in Lothbury, adding that that gentleman had expressed his wish to open an account at the Drayboro Branch, and that his cheques, drawn on London office, might be accepted for the purpose to the extent of five hundred pounds."

"Sit down, sir, sit down," said Mr. Fielding, finding that his visitor had not come to beg, borrow, or steal. "But you have made a mistake—this is not the English and Transatlantic Bank, Limited (with an emphasis on the word "limited"). "This is Fielding's old Drayboro Bank, and we do not pretend to have any connection with those very grand people in the market place to whom you have a letter."

"I am aware of that, Mr. Fielding. But the fact is—quite privately, you know—just before I left town I heard one or

two things about the English and Transatlantic I don't quite like. These joint stock banks are sometimes a little adventurous, you know."

"They are indeed, Mr. Fitzclarence," said the old-fashioned banker, rising to the bait. "We know it well enough down here. Why they discount a lot of rubbishing paper *we* wouldn't look at. They're bolstering up a number of people who had much better go through the court, and have done with it, as *I* know. But, however, that don't matter to you. What did you hear about them in London?" he inquired, sharply.

"Oh, nothing particular, except that they were doing the very thing you mention—accepting very second-class bills. I'm not a city man myself, but I believe that some of these banks are so anxious for custom, that they'll do almost anything to get it."

"So they will, sir, no doubt, confound them!" cried Mr. Fielding, hotly. "But I beg your pardon. What can I do for you?"

"Well, this—I have come here to spend the winter hunting, and, on my way down from town, I was thinking over this English and Transatlantic bank. I'm not a very rich man, Mr. Fielding, and I can't afford to lose a quarter's or a half-year's income." ("A couple of thousand a year is about his figure," thought the banker to himself.) "My capital is safe enough in the hands of trustees, and very likely I am over cautious, and the income would be safe in the Transatlantic. Yet, somehow, I am a little fidgetty; and, when I got down here, I made up my mind to ask you to take charge of a few pounds for me, just, you know, to make me quite comfortable. I won't draw *all* out of the Transatlantic; but, if you would not mind keeping a very *small* amount for me, I should be much obliged."

"With pleasure," answered Mr. Fielding; "but of course you know our rules. No over-drafts except on approved security, or by previous arrangement."

"Quite right, Mr. Fielding. I shall not, I hope, trouble you in that way. But I want to ask you another favour."

"Dear me, it's coming, after all," thought Mr. Fielding; "he wants to draw a couple of hundred at once against his London cheque in the Transatlantic, and we shall hear from town that he took out the last sixpence yesterday." Then, aloud, "What is it, sir?"

"I have some curious family relics—bracelets and other things—which belonged to my poor mother, and perhaps to *her* mother and grandmother before." ("An old family," said Mr. Fielding to himself.) "I am rather superstitious about them, and I did not like to leave them in town while I was here. But, you know, I can't lock them up in my room at the Royal William. They are not very valuable, but it is not quite safe, after all. The house is all but deserted sometimes—no one in t except a few women."

"Of course it's not safe," agreed Mr. Fielding.

"Well, sir, I've brought them here, in hopes that you will take charge of them. May I bring the case in?"

"Certainly, Mr. Fitzclarence, with pleasure," answered the old gentleman, quite relieved, and touching a hand-bell. "Bring this gentleman's jewel-case in, Fagg," he said to the clerk who obeyed the summons.

The case was brought in and placed on the banker's table, and Percy proceeded to loosen the straps, and remove the outer covering, after which he unlocked it with a small gold key he wore as a charm.

"There is no occasion to show me what's inside," observed Mr. Fielding. "Just lock the case up, and we will put it in our safe."

"Oh, you may just as well have a look at the old things," answered Percy, lifting the lid. "You see they're mostly of no great intrinsic value," he continued, displaying a tray containing some old-fashioned ornaments, a couple of lockets, a bracelet, apparently of gold, and a few gem rings; "but I am fond of them for family reasons."

Mr. Fielding was somewhat interested. The tray being lifted, a tiara or necklace of brilliants appeared in the lower compartment.

"Dear me, old family jewels! This must be worth a lot of money," observed he, looking at the gems; "it only wants a little cleaning."

"I don't know how much it is worth," answered Percy; "I don't want to sell it. I would sooner sell my last shirt."

"No doubt, no doubt," approved the banker—"quite right. I don't much favour diamonds myself as an investment. They don't pay interest, and the money's idle. But it's a different thing altogether when they're family jewels like this. It's a good name,—a good old county name. You're quite right. You don't want an inventory of these things, do you? I am afraid we can't take the responsibility of that."

"Oh no," eagerly answered Percy. "If you will only be good enough to lock up the case in your safe, you need have no responsibility as to its contents. I don't think there's much danger of any being removed."

"I don't think there is," answered Mr. Fielding, smiling. "Very well. You shall have a receipt for it. 'A leather case, with a patent lock,'" he wrote slowly, "'said to contain jewellery.' Received the above from Mr. Percy Fitzclarence for safe custody; the bank to be free of all responsibility as to contents.' That will do," he said, handing the paper to Fitzclarence, who had meanwhile locked up the case. "Now we will put it away, and you can have it, or anything out of it, at any time when the Bank is open."

The case being safely secured in the vaults, Percy handed Mr. Fielding a cheque for two hundred and fifty on the London office of the English and Transatlantic, and went through the usual formalities of signing his name, receiving a pass-book, and so on.

"Do you want any money now?" asked Mr. Fielding, whose confidence appeared quite restored.

"No, thank you, Sir," replied Percy, "I have plenty for a few days. I don't want to draw till that cheque is cleared."

"No doubt it is all right," answered the banker; "in case you want a few pounds, you know, you can have them even

before next Thursday. So you have come to hunt, have you?" he asked in a friendly way, as Percy was about to take his leave.

"Yes," said he, "I have a few horses at the Royal William."

"Good quarters," remarked Mr. Fielding. "I used to be very fond of hunting myself, in my younger days, but I have lost my seat now; I get the gout, and can't ride a bit. My son hunts, though. Do you know him?"

"I have not the pleasure," replied Percy, "you know I only arrived last night."

"To be sure," said the banker, "to be sure. Don't you know anyone here? No? What made you come down then?"

"The fact is," answered Percy, "my poor father died about a year ago, and I have had a great deal of hard work to get his affairs wound up. I wanted a thorough change of scene, and as I am very fond of hunting, I thought Drayboro would suit me. I can't afford those very fashionable countries, where men keep twelve horses and a couple of traps. I want good sport, but I don't gamble, and I don't care about a fast life."

"Very good reasons too," assented the old gentleman. "Let me see," continued he, taking a card off the chimney-piece, "the South Loamshire are at Fern Wood to-morrow. I suppose you will go there?"

"I hope so," said Percy, "it is not far, is it?"

"No, only four miles. Now look here, Mr. Fitzclarence, if you don't mind taking a plain country dinner, just come in to-night at 6.30. You will meet my son; you and he will get on together well."

"I am very much obliged to you," answered our hero, warmly, "but as an entire stranger, such—"

"Nonsense," interrupted Mr. Fielding, "you come; you will be welcome, though I daresay the dinner won't be quite what you're used to."

Thanking the hospitable banker again very heartily, Percy accepted the invitation, and got into his cart in excellent spirits.

"It's quite a question," said he to himself as he touched up Omnibus, "how far I can make that five hundred go. Will it

last me over the course or not? If I had the race quite in hand, I might get another couple of hundred from the mater, but she'd want to be sure of it first. However, I've got a good start; they say that's half the race. There is nothing wrong with the favourite. Now for exercising Kismet and Fortune. I've got my work set."

IV.

Slipping into a workmanlike suit of dittos, with gaiters to match, and putting on a pair of spurs without rowels, Percy was now ready to give Kismet a turn. He went into the bar first, where he found Mr. Lambert, none the worse for his last night's potations. After a cordial greeting, he inquired where he could find some grass and a few handy fences to give his young horses an airing. Mr. Lambert recommended Tibb's farm. Tibb, said he, was an enthusiastic sportsman, and generally had a couple of young ones himself coming on. There were several good meadows and some artificial jumps as well. "The very thing," exclaimed Percy, getting into the saddle, while his stud-groom followed on old Land League, with Fortune on a leading rein. "I'll make friends with Mr. Tibb." Nor was this at all a difficult task. After a four mile ride through lanes, during which he missed the shortest way more than once, and had some trouble in keeping Kismet in order, Percy introduced himself as a temporary resident at the Royal William, and soon gained the farmer's good graces by extravagant praise of a somewhat ungainly four-year-old the latter was "making." Land League and Fortune were quartered in the nag stables, and Percy proceeded to canter Kismet quietly round a large grass field. The young one plunged a little, and tore at his bit, but soon gave in to his rider's steady hands. Then he pulled him back to a walk, and patiently paced up and down the field for a quarter of an hour. Having by this time pretty well examined the fences, he turned Kismet round when about in the middle of the grass, and cantered him up to a hedge and ditch, somewhat increasing the

pace as he approached it. The young one stopped short, not much to his rider's surprise. Giving him a slight cut with the whip—just enough to let him know that he was doing wrong, and no more—Percy turned him back and went at it again, a little faster this time. A dig of the blunt spurs overcame Kismet's hesitation, and he landed handsomely in the plough at the far side. Patting his arched neck, Percy gradually pulled him into a walk, and then, stooping over, gave him a sweet carrot, regardless of soiling the bright bit and cheek. When Kismet had quite finished this tit-bit, he was jogged along a furrow to a ragged-looking fence and bank, with a small ditch on each side of it. Long before he reached it, Kismet pricked up his ears and began tearing at the bridle. "Steady, old man, steady," cried Percy, "this is a jump you must take slowly, so be steady." He almost reduced him to a walk before the jump, and then, finding that Kismet, who would gladly have taken it flying, appeared somewhat nervous and hesitated, he coaxed, talked to, and patted him, till at last, after repeated attempts, the colt, taking heart of grace, jumped on to the bank and down again after coming up to it at a trot. Another carrot was his reward; and the next bit of schooling took place at a gate, at which Percy practised till he got him to go close up to it, wait until it was opened, and then pass quietly. This gate led into another large grass field, and was the limit of the ground available for practice. Percy therefore rode to the far end, and then giving Kismet his head, rode straight back for the farm at a hand gallop, though holding him well together. The first fence wanted pace, as it was high and thorny, but, with a small ditch on the taking-off side only, it was safe enough, and Kismet, being somewhat driven at it, made no mistake whatever. Then came the double, to which he was brought at a gentle canter. There was a little hesitation, but no refusal. The horse "pecked" slightly on landing, but recovered himself directly and plunged forward. "Steady over the plough, old man," said Percy, guiding him into a furrow, "now you may go at this as hard as you like, for there's a big ditch on the other side." Speed, however, suited

"Teach him to jump bigger next time."

Kismet well enough; he landed several yards clear of the obstacle, and gave a couple of playful kicks as he galloped across the elastic sward towards the farm. Percy pulled him up close to Tibb, who was preparing to mount his four-year-old.

"That's a nice horse, sir," remarked the farmer, approvingly, "and moves well, too; moves very well."

"Glad you like him," replied Percy, producing another carrot for Kismet, "he wants a little riding though."

"He'll make a very good one before the season is over," observed Tibb, sententiously, as they jogged round the field side by side. "Are you going to bring the mare out now? I've got a cloth you can put over the young one."

Percy accepted the offer, and Kismet being comfortably stalled with his girths loosened and warm clothing on him, he mounted Fortune, a great strapping chestnut, with something of a fiddle head. Tibb had, after many refusals, just got his four-year-old over the artificial hurdle set up in the meadow, and the mare, seeing the colt on the far side, galloped up to it and took it freely. "Now let's try the fence into the plough," said Percy. "Better not," answered Tibb, "mine will refuse and make yours refuse too. We'll get some one to give us a lead."

Percy thought he could manage it, but the result proved that the farmer was right. The mare hesitated, then rushed at it, stopped at the brink, and settled into the ditch, whence she scrambled out again on the same side, looking almost as silly as her rider. Then Tibb tried, but of course the colt declined to face it. Finally Bartlett, the head groom, was ordered to get old Land League, who cantered up to the place unconcernedly, and jumped it slowly and without an effort. The mare then followed, making an enormous bound, and tearing along the plough at the rate of sixty miles an hour. Tibb came over next, but at the expense of a fall. "Teach him to jump bigger next time," he remarked, mounting again, with a dirty face. "Now, sir, let your man take the old black at the double."

Percy, however, first produced the inevitable carrot, and coaxed the mare into something like steadiness. Tibb grinned at this

proceeding. He wore sharp spurs and punished his horse most unmercifully where there was anything like a refusal; the system of horse-breaking in Loamshire being still somewhat rough. But Percy was not to be laughed out of his carrots, and when Fortune had successfully negotiated the double gave her another. By this time, however, his pockets were empty, and Tibb had to find him some more to carry out his principles thoroughly. By the time the mare had been got over the double, through the gate half-a-dozen times, and back across all the fences, the afternoon was far advanced, and it was high time for Percy to think of returning. Although he had been told that the party at Fielding's was to be limited to the family, our hero took care to dress as if for a ball. He knew that the natural costume of civilized man in the evening is a dress coat and white tie, and while women are often abused for being *decolletées* when others are in morning costumes, the men who appear in white ties, while the others wear shooting coats, always get the pull.

At a few minutes after six Omnibus was at the door with the dog-cart, and Percy came down in the full splendour of a fresh Poole-built evening suit. It would not have struck any one in London, but at Drayboro the very cut of the coat inspired admiration (not unmixed with envy among the men) in all beholders. It certainly fitted remarkably well, and Percy knew how to wear his clothes. He disdained the vulgar ornaments of showy studs with big stones, of gorgeous sleeve links, or silk facings. His motto in dress was, *simplex munditiis*—translated, however, into the language of the nineteenth century and interpreted by the most cultured tailors. He had hesitated for some time as to the propriety of wearing a flower in his button-hole; for to Percy even such a trifle was a matter of importance. The world is governed by trifles; the very tiniest cause often produces the most serious effects. The presence of the flower might create a prejudice in one person or the other; might give some ground for accusing him of foppishness or vanity, or some still more heinous crime. So the decision was against it, and he buttoned up his ulster without fearing to crush any delicate petals. A

nod to Miss Polly, a few words on the subject of the next morning's arrangements with Mr. Lambert, and he was off.

It was not a long drive to Cray's Foot and the road was good; Percy therefore arrived in excellent time. He was received by a somewhat formidable lady in a scarlet silk gown, whom he at once put down as Mrs. Fielding; nor was he mistaken. Until her husband came into the drawing-room—a very comfortable apartment on a large scale—she was very affable, but with the condescension of a duchess. When Mr. Fielding appeared however, she grew less proud, and quite thawed before the soup was removed. The party consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Fielding, their son, an elderly niece who appeared to act as a sort of companion to Mrs. Fielding, and young Mr. Hargrove, the son of a neighbouring country gentleman.

"I told you you would have to take pot-luck, Mr. Fitzclarence," said the banker, when they sat down, "and I have only been able to get Mr. Hargrove to dine with us. He and my son are both hunting men, so I dare say you will get on all right."

Percy, of course, expressed himself perfectly satisfied. As to the dinner, even an epicure could have found no fault with it, except its somewhat provincial and old fashioned arrangement. Everything was excellent of its sort, and plenty of it. A stout butler and a handy footman waited on the party, and the glass, silver, and crockery were very handsome, if not quite according to the latest London fancy. As is so usual in the country, where flowers grow, there were none on the table, their place being taken by a huge silver vase or *épergne*, bearing as many candlesticks and "knops" as that which was ordered to be made for the Temple. The whole thing spoke of comfort and substantial resources. Some very good dry Moet and Chandon accompanied the dinner, while unexceptionable claret and port were placed on the table at dessert. Percy devoted himself unremittingly to his hostess during the repast, but made, as he said to himself, a waiting race of it. He was trying to discover Mrs. Fielding's particular weakness, if she had one, and he had to try often and start many topics before he succeeded. At last however it

turned out that the lady and her numble niece were enthusiastic and somewhat high churchwomen. This came out only just before old Mr. Fielding murmured a short grace "after meat"; yet in the short interval which elapsed before the ladies retired Percy had scored heavily by the intense sympathy he expressed for the poor persecuted ritualists,and by his apparent familiarity with all the details of chasuble, venatic, stole, and other clerical properties. "We expect Mr. Vestment, our curate," said Mrs. Fielding, smiling sweetly as she rose from the table; "I want you to know him; don't stop too long over your wine."

Percy however who liked claret better than port, did not hurry down the banker's Lafitte. Fielding junior, a fine tall young fellow, with brown whiskers and his father's small but bright eyes, introduced the subject of hunting by enquiring what horses Percy had brought down; and when the topic was started, not only Mr. Hargrove (a somewhat shy youth with an apple face) but the old gentleman himself joined in enthusiastically. They told the new comer more about the coverts, and the meets, and the best runs, than he perhaps wanted to know; but they also told him something about the people, which he wanted to know very much. It was not long before Lord Sevenoaks' name cropped up, of whom all spoke in the warmest terms; and then, of course, Lady Maud was mentioned. Percy watched the two younger men intently while this lady was being described, her figure, her manner, and her seat on horseback praised. On the face of young Hargrove there was a tell-tale blush, and he became silent, which showed that the apple-faced boy was smitten, and that his aspiring love was supposed to be a secret. Fielding, however, frankly declared that Lady Maud was the handsomest and nicest girl in the county, and that Wentworth was a fool not to settle matters with her, and fix a day for the wedding.

"Perhaps she won't," suggested his father.

"Perhaps not, father," answered the young man, "but I don't think she cares about any one else, from what I can see. Here I'm an outsider. She's a thoroughly jolly girl, and almost as kind to people as her father, but somehow she is not quite my

sort, and never was. She rides straight enough; but I never took to her, somehow. And a very good thing too, or I might have got myself into a hopeless condition of unrequited affection, like some fellows I know."

Poor Hargrove grew scarlet. Percy turned the conversation by enquiring whether Captain Wentworth was as well off as he had heard.

"Very comfortable indeed," corroborated old Fielding, "a very wealthy man. The Earl would not give his daughter to a poor man, you may depend upon it. He's very much in favour of the match. You see, the girls have forty thousand pounds each, besides a good deal of land."

"I hope no penniless adventurer will snap one of them up," said Percy, piously.

"Not very likely," answered young Fielding. "Lady Maud can take care of herself, besides being well looked after, and the other is a baby."

"No more wine? Then shall we join the ladies?" asked the old gentleman.

"There's that sniffling parson there," growled his son, *sotto voce*, to Percy. "We must get away as soon as possible. Have you your trap here?"

"It's coming at ten," answered he.

"Then I'll take you to the club at Drayboro, if you'll give me a lift," whispered Fielding. "It's not a bad place; there are a lot of fellows there I'll introduce you to."

So it was arranged. Percy had a very tiresome half-hour with Mr. Vestment and the two ritualistic ladies, but being on difficult ground (for his knowledge of the subject was more limited than Mrs. Fielding supposed), he held his tongue as much as possible, and only occasionally murmured a mild assent. The banker however was not going to let him off so easily, and put a number of indirect questions to our hero on the subject of his family and relations.

"To which branch of the Fitzclarences do you belong?" said he. "It is, I believe, a numerous family?"

"It is," answered Percy, "so numerous as almost to puzzle its own members. But I had the misfortune to lose my good father last year. And as to my poor mother"—with these words his voice choked with emotion—"why my visit to the bank this morning will have told you of her."

"I beg your pardon," said the good old gentleman, heartily.

"Oh; don't mind me. I am rather affected when I speak about it, that's all. I have scarcely a near relation left in the world," added he, sadly.

Mr. Fielding would sorely have liked to ask what Mr. Fitzclarence senior was when he still graced this world, and what relationship Percy bore to the numerous Fitzclarences of Burke's landed gentry; but in the face of Percy's evident grief, he could not decently press the matter. The dog-cart having been announced, Percy took his leave on the plea of having to turn out early next morning; but looking round the room he did not see young Fielding.

He got into his cart and drove away to the lodge. The gates were closed, and a figure came out of the darkness to open them which Percy at first took for the lodge-keeper.

"All right, Fitzclarence," shouted a cheery voice. "I had to sneak out the back way, or my mother would never have let me go. You know what women are. Have a cigar?" And he swung himself up.

The offer being willingly accepted, the two young men chatted in the most friendly manner all the way to Drayboro'. Here Percy was introduced to the club, and his name at once put down for a month as a visitor. It was not very lively, and rather like a second-rate hotel. But in the billiard-room there was a pool, in which both joined, and in the course of the game our hero made the acquaintance of Mr. Biggs, junior, who fluked him in twice running. Percy abstained from swearing, and this rather pleased young Biggs, who was accustomed to fluke and to be sworn at. Both having lost their lives early in the game, they sat down and looked on together.

"Are you going to hunt to-morrow?" asked Percy.

"Yes, I think I shall go to Fern Wood to have a look at them," replied the doctor's son. "My nag is scarcely in condition yet, and I shan't gallop her much."

"Nor are mine," said Percy. "Which way is it?"

"Oh, you can come with me," suggested Mr. Biggs. "Fielding tells me you're stopping at the Royal William. I'll call for you at ten o'clock. I say, that's a tip-top coat of yours!" continued he, admiringly, as Percy slipped into his swallow-tail again. "I wish I could get old Beadles to make me one like that."

It was scarcely our hero's line to tell young Biggs that Poole himself would fail to make a coat look well on his short, punchy, high-shouldered figure. On the contrary, he gave him Mr. Poole's address, and the conversation became friendly and intimate; for Biggs was a thorough provincial, full of curiosity about London, and anxiety to be informed on many matters which are not discussed in the newspapers. There was a good deal of promiscuous hand-shaking when at about twelve o'clock, Percy resisted all further efforts to detain him, and walked down the few yards to the Royal William.

V.

At ten o'clock precisely Percy was ready, fresh from a good breakfast, and having thoroughly enjoyed his bath. He was carefully dressed in white breeches and waistcoat, top boots, and a black coat, for he would not don pink till he knew the country. Old Land League was to be the mount to-day, and had just gone on; Omnibus was saddled ready to start. It was not without consideration that he had fixed on Land League. It was a strange country to him, and he did not wish to gallop over it on a raw horse before he knew his way about; nor had he any intention of cutting down the field. His sole object was to ride steadily and to avoid giving offence. Land League could be thoroughly trusted; he could go fast enough in any ordinary run, would not gallop over the hounds, nor make his rider ridiculous by refusals. Soon young Biggs came in, booted and spurred, and ordered a refresher at the bar.

"Here's a bore," said he, "blessed if the governor isn't coming out on the old mare. Says the hounds are so near he may as well have a look at them. Sorry for you, Mr. Fitzclarence; you'll find it rather slow. Perhaps you'd like to ride on?"

"Not at all," answered Percy; "I shall feel proud to make Dr. Biggs' acquaintance. I don't mind a bit."

"Well, perhaps it's just as well you should know him," remarked the youth, "in case you break your neck. He'll get the coroner to sit upon you like a bird, he will, and rather like the job."

Miss Polly smiled. "For shame, Mr. Biggs, how can you talk so? But here comes the Doctor."

In walked Dr. Biggs, to fetch his hopeful son.

"I was sure I'd find you here," growled he. "Come along, we're late already. Oh, I beg your pardon. This is the gentleman you were speaking of at breakfast, I suppose? Glad to make your acquaintance, Sir, I am sure," said he, raising his

"The Doctor on an old grey mare."

low-crowned hat and then holding out his hand, "glad to see any of Mr. Fielding's friends."

"It's another patient for you, governor," remarked the young man; "don't you hope he'll break a leg to-day?"

"Hold your tongue, you young scoundrel," cried his father. "I've too many patients already. It's only his nonsense, Sir; you mustn't take any notice," said he to Percy apologetically.

"Why, governor, you were as pleased as Punch when Squire Hargrove was upset out of that dog-cart last summer and smashed his arm. You know you were. Why, you kept walking up and down the dining-room saying, 'A beautiful fracture; a bee-utiful fracture, to be sure.'"

"Nonsense, Jack," retorted the Doctor, "I said 'a beautiful operation!' So it was; you'd have thought so yourself if you had known anything about it. Why, the great surgeon from London, Sir Charles Mendum, was quite surprised himself! But here, we've had enough of this nonsense. Let's get on."

They were soon on their way, the Doctor on an old grey mare rather the worse for work, but game looking and wiry; young Biggs on a light fidgetty thoroughbred; and Percy cantering along the side of the road on Omnibus. There was the usual horsey and sporting talk till they reached Fern Wood, where one of the first persons to greet them was young Fielding, who shook our hero very warmly by the hand.

"Very glad to see you, Fitzclarence," said he; "I suppose you've sent your hunter on. Come and let me introduce you to the master: he's just round the corner with the hounds."

"Next to an introduction from the banker, I suppose the best thing is an introduction from the banker's son," thought Percy to himself, as they rode up to Mr. Slogum, a business-like customer, with foxy whiskers tinged with grey, mounted on a powerful bay, and surrounded by a beautiful lot of hounds, which kept looking up appealingly to him for a little notice.

"This is Mr. Fitzclarence, a friend of my father's," said Fielding, and, as usual, cordial hand-shaking followed.

"Very glad to see a gentleman of your name," said Mr.

Slogum. "I knew your father or your uncle, I daresay you can tell me which it was, down in Herefordshire. A very fine man too."

"That is the other branch of the family," answered Percy. "Very distant relations indeed."

"Oh," continued the master; "never mind. Any member of *that* family is welcome here."

And before the hounds moved on, it came to be generally understood that the young man on the strong old black horse was one of the old Fitzclarences, a friend of Mr. Fielding's, from London. Perhaps the banker had scarcely anticipated that Percy would be brought out so entirely under his auspices. He had however been too favourably impressed by our hero to deny the intimacy when asked about him on the next market-day, and when his country customers came in to have a chat in the bank parlour. He told them that Mr. Fitzclarence had come down with a good introduction from London (which was true in his eyes, for what introduction can be better than a balance?), that he had trusted the Fitzclarence family jewels to the care of the old Drayboro' Bank, and that he seemed a very decent fellow. Need it be said that in a week's time the said family jewels had almost assumed the importance of Regalia? "A tiara of diamonds, my dear, and a necklace," said old Mrs. Trotter to the good rector's wife. "I hear the stones in them are as big as filberts! And no end of rings, and bracelets, and brooches, and things, all gold and precious stones." "A thoroughly sound young man, a worthy descendant of a fine old family," remarked Dr. Biggs to his son and heir. "I wish you were like him. Does not sneer at his elders, rides a horse with good manners, and does not hang about hotel bars. Has a lot of money, too, I understand from Fielding. So would you have, if you only worked, you lazy young scoundrel."

But we are anticipating; the above opinions were not ventilated until after the day at Fern Wood. On that morning they were yet unformed, nor had the story of the jewels got about. We must now return to the field, which, having assembled and

done the usual coffee-housing, moved on to the further end of the wood. Percy rode rather in the rear, with young Biggs closer to him than was quite safe, for the little thoroughbred was particularly lively with her heels. Biggs, however, found the companionship pleasant, and Percy knew better than to snub him.

"There she is!" at last he exclaimed.

"Who?" asked Percy.

"Why, Lady Maud! Haven't you heard of her? The prettiest girl in England, and not a bit proud. She's Lord Sevenoaks' daughter."

"Here's another victim," thought Percy, as he looked back to the place pointed out. There was a pony chaise, in which sat two girls; one, the younger, in a little fur cap and similar cape, holding the reins; the other, the elder, in a low-crowned pot and a riding habit, evidently preparing to mount a bay horse, which a groom had led up. Percy stopped to have a better view. Lady Maud was tall; her figure still youthful, but graceful and rounded; her shoulders sloping. A knot of brown hair peeped out under her hat; she had a short nose, gracefully arched eyebrows, a broad white forehead, and a pair of dark eyes of which no one had yet quite fixed the colour. Her mouth was small and well shaped, but the upper lip and firm chin betrayed decision of character. Altogether she was strikingly handsome, but, notwithstanding her youth and smiles, of a somewhat severe style of beauty.

"What a handsome creature!" exclaimed Percy, quite fascinated.

"Here, don't you go and play the fool like the rest of them," cried young Biggs; "they all fall in love with her, but it's of no use. She'll marry Captain Wentworth, if she marries anybody. Don't *you* go spooning and moping after her like Hargrove and Smales, and like *I* did last year. But I've got over it now. She won't look at the likes of me, though the governor *is* her trustee. Come along."

"Which is Captain Wentworth?" asked Percy, still looking; "the man who helped her up?"

"No; that's Lord Algernon Joscelyn," answered the youth, "it's her brother. He's a good lot, he is. You should have seen him ride Blazes in the Hunt Steeplechase last Spring. The professionals were not in it with him, upon my word. Won easily, too, at the finish. Captain Wentworth is that big brute with the straw-coloured moustache, behind the trap. Great ass he is! Not half good enough for her. But hallo! Come along, come along, I believe they've found a fox."

Not a doubt of it. The field was scurrying away to the left at full tear; some into the wood through a bridle gate, others along the edge towards a gap in the fence, others again on the higher ground along the occupation road.

"Which way is he likely to break?" asked Percy, as they rode towards the gap.

"Don't know! Very likely he won't break at all," answered Biggs. "There are too many people about."

And young Biggs turned out to be right. Before they had reached the fence they noticed the leading horseman pull up, then the music of the hounds, which had been gradually growing more distinct, came back to them from the wood, and, after a short silence, interrupted only by the cries of the whips: "At him, lasses! Eugh at him, Venus!" there was another great burst, and the end of the poor fox had come sooner than any one wanted. Having been headed back, he was chopped in covert, and after his funeral rites had been performed, the hounds, followed by a long line of horsemen and carriages, trotted up the road to draw a neighbouring spinney.

By a little judicious manœuvring, Percy had now got rid of young Biggs, and found himself alongside of Fielding, who was riding with Lord Algernon. Of course, Fielding, who was the essence of good nature, and never sought for anybody's motives because he seldom had any himself except the apparent one, introduced our hero to his Lordship, who gave him a friendly nod and the usual greeting of "Glad to see you in our country." To this, however, he added, "I daresay you'll find Slogum's hounds poor sport after the Pytchley. They're scarcely fast

enough. But they can hunt well, and they can run sometimes, can't they, Fielding?"

"They can, indeed," answered the latter. "Do you remember the twenty-five minutes we had last March from this very place?"

"Yes, that was a good run. I'm afraid we sha'n't get such another to-day; it's too early in the season."

"I have never hunted with the Pytchley," now interposed Percy, "and I am sure I shall find the South Loamshire hounds quite fast enough for my horses."

"Where have you been before?" asked Lord Algernon.

"Oh, all about," replied Percy. "The Kerry, and the Roscommon, and the South Devon, and a few scratch packs. I have not stopped with any of them very long. I have just hunted a few times from the places where I was staying, you know. My friends used to give me mounts if I had not brought horses."

Strange, perhaps, that Percy should not mention the Southdown, with whom he had ridden so often as a youth, nor the packs in the neighbourhood of his old tutor. But perhaps he had forgotten them.

"Who were you staying with in county Kerry?" asked Lord Algernon. "I know that country very well."

"A fellow called Delaney," answered Percy on the spur of the moment.

"Delaney? Don't remember the name a bit."

"Oh, I was not there long," replied Percy, anxious to change the conversation. "Delaney only took the place for a few weeks, and I went down to keep him company. But is not this the gorse?" he asked, hurriedly.

"Yes, here we are," answered Fielding; "and I think there's a fox in it, by the way the hounds are working."

But Lord Algernon was still puzzling over Delaney. "What was the place you say he had?" he asked again.

"Oh, Westcrea Hall," said Percy, confusedly. "It's a new place. Very likely built since you were there."

"Not very likely," Lord Algernon remarked, "considering I was in Kerry shooting last month. Is it anywhere near Ballyragge?"

"No," answered our hero, deeply wishing county Kerry at Jericho. "Quite the other way. It must be twenty miles from Ballyragge."

Fortune, however, protected him from further cross-examination. "Gone away! Gone away!" was heard from the other side of the gorse, and the whole field tore after the cheerful "too-toot" of the horn. As Percy rode down the first plough, he was full of self reproaches. "Why on earth did I lie?" he asked himself. "I never *do* lie—at least, hardly ever. But when I do it always gets me into a mess. Why the deuce didn't I stick to Kent and Sussex, and the places I know? Confound it, what an ass I made of myself. And I don't even remember the names of the other places I talked about. I hope *he* doesn't. If I am saved this time, I'll stick to the Tickham and West Kent and Surrey Staghounds in future—I will, by Jove."

Fortunately, again, Lord Algernon had really only caught up or heard the county Kerry, and the run put even this out of his head. Fielding had, of course, not even noticed our hero's confusion. His Lordship, however, though quite unsuspicious, was puzzled for a moment. But now their business was to keep with the South Loamshire, and this seemed enough for the time, for the hounds were running fast across stiff ploughs, and the ground was holding. A couple of fences had been successfully crossed, but there was a great crowd at the gaps, and Percy noticed that Lord Algernon avoided them, and took a line of his own, which his sister followed at a respectable interval. A little on her left rode Captain Wentworth. Percy roused old Land League up a bit, and got abreast of Lord Algernon, but well on his right, also selecting a line of his own to keep clear of the crowd. So far, there was nothing formidable in the fencing. But they now came to a large stubble-field more sticky than the ploughs, and in which they were obliged to cross the furrows almost square. The far fence, through which they jumped or scrambled,

looked black and uninviting; it was down in the bottom, too, so that very likely there was a water ditch close to it. Percy fixed on a place which looked a little thinner than the rest, and rode straight for it, rather harder than usual, holding his arm up to shield his eyes. Lord Algernon, on the contrary, steadied his horse a little, so that Lady Maud's mount should not get blown in the sticky stubble. Hence Percy was first at the fence of their little group. Old Land League was not going to make a mistake on the first day of the season, and having plenty of steam on, crashed well through the briar and over a nasty deep ditch on the far side. Also, as usual, he did not jump a foot too far, for it was one of Land League's peculiarities that he was always within an ace of coming down, but never did. There was now a fine hole where our hero had jumped, and Lord Algernon at once made for it, to save his sister scratches. As Percy landed, the hounds threw up on the edge of a brook, not fifty yards from the fence he had just jumped. A few were with them, having got through further down on the far right. "He has gone down stream, I think," quoth Percy, as he watched them feathering among the osiers and stumpy bushes which fringed the brook.

Lord Algernon and Lady Maud had stopped like himself, close to the water's edge. "He's crossed," said Lord Algernon; "but I think you're right, Mr. Fitzclarence, he's run a little down stream first. It's a beastly place, too—deep and dirty. You must come round by the bridge, Maud," he continued; "you can't jump that—the banks are as rotten as possible. They're on him again!" as the hounds at last crossed the brook and broke away in full cry. "Come along, there's no time to lose."

But Lady Maud hesitated. She knew that it was a long way round by the bridge, and she thought her horse could jump the water. The huntsman had just taken it on the far right; why shouldn't she? While she was still hesitating, she saw Percy, who had ridden back a little, come down at full speed to the water.

"Never had such a capital chance in my life," thought he. "Everybody watching except her brother, and she close by. It's worth a ducking, anyhow. Come up!"

Hands well down, head straight, knees close as wax, the snaffle tight, curb rather slack, spurs (without rowels) just touching his horse's flanks. As he rode to it, passing within three yards of Lady Maud, she said to herself, in a quiet sort of way, "What a nice-looking man! I hope he'll get over."

And he did. Land League had been roused a little more than usual, and jumped very far. There was no pecking, and no just saving himself, this time.

When Lady Maud saw this, she made up her mind in a moment. Disregarding Captain Wentworth's admonitions (her brother had already gone on), she rode at the brook, giving her horse a good run at it. Now, somehow, Percy had guessed what she was about to do, and had pulled up on the other side. He also fancied that her horse would jump short, and he was very nearly right. The horse cleared the brook well enough, but the treacherous bank gave way under his hind legs, and he slipped back. Another instant, and his fair rider would have been in the water, but Percy was off old Land League as quick as lightning, and seized his head just in time. The purchase thus given just enabled the animal to hold on, and Lady Maud could spring out of the saddle. There was then no further difficulty, as, when relieved of her weight, he scrambled up the bank with ease. Captain Wentworth, young Biggs, and a few more, had been spectators of the scene from the other side. Before it was quite over, Wentworth charged the brook a few yards higher up, and came to assist, just as it was too late.

She had already placed her little foot in Percy's outstretched hand, and was in her saddle again with a bound. "Thank you very much," she said, and Percy knew better than to push his advantage. Simply raising his hat he walked away to where Land League was grazing, and was about to ride after the hounds, when a splash attracted his attention. It was young Biggs, who, determined to emulate the feats of his betters,

had forced his weedy mare at the brook. After sundry refusals, she jumped almost into the middle, and having got rid of her rider, scrambled out gaily for a little hunting on her own account. Percy, however, again came to the rescue, caught the mare, and led her back to her owner, who was standing disconsolately on the bank, while the water streamed from him. "Are you hurt, Biggs?" "No," answered he, "not a bit, only very wet." "Then jump on, and look sharp—hounds are a long way off by this time." And away they went, all four abreast together, for Lady Maud had hung back a moment to see Percy's second rescue.

"Let us get on, Maud," cried Wentworth, hurrying up the grass field, "or we shall never catch them. Never mind young Biggs. He'll dry soon enough."

But Maud *did* mind young Biggs. Not that she cared whether he was wet or dry, but she wanted to know who Percy was. So, while Wentworth galloped away as hard as he could, and our hero after him, she hung back for Biggs.

"Who is that member of the Royal Humane Society?" she said. "Do you know him, Mr. Biggs?"

"It's Mr. Percy Fitzclarence," answered the youth. "He's a great swell just come from London, and a friend of Fielding's. But he's an awfully good fellow, all the same. There's not three men here who would have stopped in a run to catch the mare and help me out of that filthy water."

"Oh!" said Lady Maud, reflectively, as she popped over a low post and rails just behind Wentworth. "I *thought* he was a gentleman. I am glad I was right. I wonder which branch of the Fitzclarences he belongs to?"

It was not long before they fell in with the hounds and the rest of the field, for the scent was bad and checks were frequent. Percy was careful not to obtrude himself on Lady Maud's notice. He thought that he had done enough for one day; and when slow hunting gave everybody a chance of following the hounds, he quietly resumed the even tenor of his way, chatting now with Dr. Biggs, now with young Hopeful, and then again with Fielding or

another of the numerous men to whom he had been introduced, just as chance would have it. After another long hour, during which the scent grew steadily worse, even the most enthusiastic admitted that there was no chance of getting on terms with the hunted fox, and Mr. Slogum held a short consultation with the veterans under the lee of a hedge. Sandwich-boxes and flasks were produced, and Percy, not wishing to give old Land League too much work, and quite satisfied with his performance so far, enquired his way home and turned away. He was not too impetuous to jog on very quietly indeed, and on this occasion he rode even more gently than usual.

His thoughts were various and interesting enough to beguile the way. Wide fields for ambition had often before tempted him, but never had the upward path appeared so attractive as to-day. His imagination overleapt all obstacles, and in his somewhat exultant mood he already reckoned on a future which would have appeared fanatic and impossible to him in his more sober moments. He was intoxicated with admiration for Lady Maud, and did not awake from his dreams of "fair women and brave" till his horse's hoofs clattered on the cobble stones of Drayboro.

VI.

Next morning the Bankinsop Stag Hounds (a private pack hunting on the confines of the South Loamshire and the Wyvern) were to meet some miles on the other side of Drayboro'. There was little chance of any of the South Loamshire magnates coming all that way, particularly as most of them rather despised "calf-hunting." Percy therefore resolved to ride Fortune over to the meet, and to hunt Kismet, who wanted more training than any of them. "It will be as well," thought he, "to teach the beggar manners before I take him out on this side of the country. I have begun very well, and don't want to make an ass of myself yet." The evening was spent quietly at the Royal William, the landlord was invited up to crack a bottle, and the friendship between the two was further cemented. The next morning was wet and unpromising, but at eleven o'clock Percy was in the saddle and trotted off on Fortune, who pulled hard, as he had anticipated. He knew scarcely one person in the field, the only face he recognised being that of Farmer Tibb, who, of course, was delighted to see him. The stag was turned out in a paddock close to a farmhouse, the occupier of which invited all-comers to a substantial breakfast. Percy did not neglect the opportunity of making the acquaintance of the people on this side of the country, but the field was uninteresting, and as he was not at all sure of Kismet he was quite willing to pass unnoticed. The colt gave a good deal of trouble at first, and came down heavily at a biggish jump with a slippery landing. Percy was used to falls, and, as the ground was soft, no harm was done. It was a slow run for nearly an hour, and more than once the scent failed altogether. Then, however, the rain ceased, and the hounds having been taken on to a holloa, tore away very fast across some small fields of alternate grass and stubble. After a sharp twenty minutes, including the inevitable mile or two of turnpike, the hounds viewed the deer and began racing in earnest. Percy jumped off the road

into a big grass field, and let Kismet have his head, for he knew that the take was near. He was surprised and pleased at the way the thoroughbred breasted a steep ascent, and then galloped across the wide table-land beyond, passing every other horse with ease. Two small fences, which he took in his stride like a veteran, and Percy beheld the deer soiling in a pond, the hounds baying round, rushing in and out again, and threatening to kill the poor creature in another minute or two. The whip came up close behind him, then a farmer. The three managed, between them, to keep the hounds off, and to lock the deer up in a neighbouring stable. Then the rest of the field arrived, much pleased with the pace of the last ten minutes. Percy, having presented the huntsman with half a sovereign, and the whips with five shillings each, took off his hat to the master and turned for home. "This horse will win me a steeplechase," thought he, as he walked quietly along the road. "He is framing splendidly. There is no knowing what a real race-horse can do till you try." Then he pulled up at a farmhouse, and got some gruel and a couple of carrots, and jogged on steadily in the pouring rain, for it had come on worse than ever.

Drayboro' High Street was crowded as he rode down to the Royal William. It was market day, and the rain had not deterred the farmers and country gentlemen, who were standing about in waterproofs and huge capes, talking of the price of corn, the condition of the land, cows, pigs, horses, and hunting. At Fielding's Bank a mail-phaeton was drawn up, and as Percy passed an old gentleman came out of the folding-doors and got in. The banker stood on his door-step, seeing his visitor drive off, and waved a friendly salute to Percy, who stopped to speak to him.

"That's Lord Sevenoaks," said Mr. Fielding; "he was just talking about you. Come in out of the rain."

"I must take my horse home," answered Percy.

"Well, then, come up by-and-bye, when you have changed your clothes, and have a glass of sherry."

"Thanks—I will," said Percy, and he hurried on.

Now this is what had passed between Lord Sevenoaks and

the banker. His Lordship having settled the business which brought him in, said, as he rose from his own especial chair in the bank parlour, "By-the-bye, Fielding, who's that young fellow your son brought out to see the hounds yesterday?"

"I don't know much about him," answered Mr. Fielding, "but his name is one of the oldest in England; he seems a very gentlemanly young man, and he has a little money."

And then he related how Percy had called, had opened an account, had left a case of jewels with him, including a fine tiara of diamonds, and had dined at Craysfoot in the evening, and made himself agreeable all round.

"Well, from what Maud tells me," said Lord Sevenoaks, "he is a very good rider, and he certainly saved her from a thorough drenching at the Mallow Brook. Do you think I might ask him to dinner? It would be civil."

"Well, my Lord, there would be no harm in it," said Fielding; "he seems quiet and unobtrusive."

"I tell you what, Fielding," said his Lordship, after a pause; "the hounds meet a couple of miles from my place to-morrow. I'll go and have a look at him myself first. You know, I have to be rather particular on account of the girls."

"Oh! he is not *that* sort!" Mr. Fielding interposed. "I don't think you need be afraid of a poor Fitzclarence making love to Lady Maud. He seems particularly quiet, and rather inclined to avoid ladies' society."

"Very well; we'll see about it. Algy says he's a humbug, and pretends he can't find him in Burke, but Wentworth rather likes him, and he seems a useful sort of fellow. Good-bye, Fielding; and don't forget about Williams. You must not let that bill of his be dishonoured, you know; he's a hard-working man with a large family."

"All right, Lord Sevenoaks," answered Fielding; "you are always paying your own tenants' rent, I know. There are very few landlords like you."

"Plenty, and better too," said Lord Sevenoaks, smiling. "Good-bye. Now don't come out in the rain."

And thus it happened that next morning an elderly but handsome man, with a healthy red face, snow-white whiskers, and a broad brimmed low-crowned hat, rode up to Kingston cross-roads between Lord Algernon and Lady Maud Joscelyn. Percy had brought out Destiny, and this time he had not been afraid to sport pink; and having ascertained that Mr. Slogum's hounds were principally supported by subscriptions, he had also supplied himself with a cheque for twenty-five guineas, which, with his card, he presented to the secretary, Mr. Twyman. He was, therefore, doubly well received, and at once raised from the category of "hard-riding swells, who come down and enjoy sport and pay nothing," to the rank of a distinguished stranger of means. He was talking to Mr. Slogum when Lord Sevenoaks rode up, and, guessing who it was, at once drew his mare back.

"Is that the new London man?" asked his lordship of the master, after the usual interchange of civilities.

"Yes, my Lord," replied Slogum. "Twyman tells me he's just given five-and-twenty to the hunt. He's a gentleman, at any rate, and doesn't want to enjoy himself at other people's expense."

"That's a good sign," remarked his lordship. "I should like to know him. Introduce him to me, will you?"

Mr. Slogum, who had an enormous respect for Lord Sevenoaks as the largest landowner and the principal supporter of the South Loamshire Hunt, and scarcely less for the name of Fitzclarence, which was interwoven with some of his earliest hunting experiences, at once sent his second horseman in search of Percy, who, we may guess, was not far off.

"Lord Sevenoaks will be glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Fitzclarence," said Slogum; and having accomplished the introduction, he ordered the hounds forward to draw the nearest covert.

Percy rode along abreast of Lord Sevenoaks, who asked him a few friendly questions, and thanked him cordially for having assisted his daughter on the day at Fern Wood. Percy assured him that it was of no consequence at all, and answered all the questions

"Is that the new London man?"

put to him as frankly as possible, but without wasting words. Of his family he only said that it was not the Herefordshire branch, a question Lord Sevenoaks asked at once. Then, as Lady Maud rode up to her father's side, he raised his hat and fell back into the ruck of the field.

A great deal of time was wasted in the large woods near the cross roads. Foxes were found in plenty, but they would not run, and the sport was an exact copy of cub-hunting. It was lunch time before they had had more than a canter over two fields. Percy abstained from galloping up and down the rides, and sat for some time on a stile watching and listening intently; there was nothing better and wiser, thought he. But he very nearly lost a chance; for when many of the field began to weary of the woods, and were taking to sherry and sandwiches, and smoke, an old fox took heart of grace, and was away before nine-tenths of the men knew anything about it. From his stile Percy just caught a glimpse of someone waving his hat on the hill-side four fields away, and he was in the saddle in a moment. To the left, or straight on, he hardly knew, and would probably have taken the wrong turn if Tibb, one of the veterans, had not shouted out "He's sure to turn left-handed, sir; go up the field." Tibb was fortunately right, for after a couple of moderate fences had been crossed Percy viewed the hounds as they turned in a great curve towards him, followed by a small string of horsemen. He saw that there was one lady amongst them, and soon recognised Lady Maud. Yesterday's rain had made it heavy going, the grass was soppy, and the ploughs very holding. Having joined the hounds, therefore, he began trying to solve the difficult problem of riding well forward and yet saving his horse. At a gate, where there was a short check, he noticed that though Lady Maud was well up, and Lord Sevenoaks himself close at hand, neither Lord Algernon, nor Wentworth, nor many others, were within sight. They had, no doubt, taken the wrong side of the wood, and the deep Claysmore brook was between them and the hounds. "Lucky again," thought he; "thanks to Tibb and my quick sight. I don't believe I should have seen that fellow

waving his hat if I had not been on the top of the stile; and I had not time to tell the others." On they went again, through a small spinney in which the hounds hardly dwelt a moment, past a farm, where the cart colts and fillies rushed after the field in a mass, attempting to gallop through the gates with the others; then down a lane, and out of it over a nice clean-cut hedge into a big field of mangolds, where the sticky ground and heaps of roots brought one or two to grief; then a pretty bit of hunting by a pond, where old Lazybones hit it off when the young ones were all at fault, and so through some gates to the cramped country at Monkfield, many miles from the find. By this time the heavy going had begun to tell on the horses, many of whom were scarcely in condition. Looking forward, there were only Mr. Denton, a gentleman farmer who rode the best cattle and kept the best table in the country, the first whip, and the huntsman. Near him, Percy saw Lady Maud, Fielding, the faithful Tibb, and a couple more. About fifty yards behind was Slogum with some half-dozen, and in what the artists call the "middle distance" Lord Sevenoaks' grey appeared fagging along as well as his rider's weight and his own condition would allow. They were now in a very awkward country indeed. Orchards alternated with narrow allotment strips, and the ground, just cleared of potatoes and other vegetables, was deeper and more holding than ever, while the fences consisted of small sharp stakes connected by firm wattle binders. Every jump wanted doing, and the horses were no longer quite fit to rise to them. A few of these enclosures quite choked off the master and several men, who turned off through the garden gate of a cottage, hoping to cut in beyond Monkfield. Percy, however, kept on with the hard riders, though taking a good pull at Destiny. At last he saw a big grass field rising behind the last and apparently the nastiest of the fences, and on the outline of the hill, which was sharply cut against the sky, there appeared a small reddish object. He had plenty of wind left to yell out a loud view halloa! and raced at the last fence, while the hounds were tearing up the hill with fresh music. Destiny rose to it gallantly, but only just saved

herself, for she was nearly done. Even in this moment of supreme excitement, when the hounds had viewed their fox and were racing him down, Percy looked back for Lady Maud. She had heard the holloa and the music of the pack, and, looking forward, seemed scarcely to notice the fence that had yet to be crossed. Her horse's shoulders and neck were one mass of foam, while his red nostrils were pulsating rapidly. He was nearly done, and in another moment, not rising sufficiently to clear the treacherous wattles, he crashed heavily forward and fell over. A dimness came before Percy's eyes. "Good God!" he exclaimed, pulling the mare back and jumping off, "she must be killed!" There was a moment of confused heels and hoofs and skirts; then, as he reached the spot, Lady Maud got up, very pale, her habit torn, her hat hanging down by the guard, and her beautiful hair all loose in the wind.

"Are you hurt, Lady Maud?" he cried.

"No," she answered; "I think not. See to poor Merlin, please."

Poor Merlin had struggled to his feet. There he stood, with distended nostrils, glaring eyes, and heaving flanks. Blood was running slowly from a cruel wound in his chest; the sharp stake which had caused it was lying on the ground, its point steeped in gore. There was no one else near except Tibb, who came up to them—the huntsman, whip, and forward riders had not seen the smash; the others had turned off.

"The horse is badly staked," said Tibb. "We must try and get him into some stable here."

The two men loosened the girths, and Lady Maud could not repress her sobs as she looked at her favourite's wound. Tibb did his best with a handkerchief, and then proceeded to lead the poor beast gently towards the village, while Percy held the other two horses.

"What on earth will you do, Lady Maud?" he asked. "We must be ten miles from Jocelyn Park."

"Twelve," she answered; "but never mind about me. Oh, poor Merlin! I rode you too hard, you dear thing! I forgot

that you were not in condition," and she walked beside the horse, and patted him, and tried to staunch his wound with her tiny handkerchief.

They found a wretched nag-stable, and Tibb, who was something of a vet, pinned up the wound and did all that was possible without professional assistance. He proposed to gallop over to Drayton, the nearest place where there was a surgeon. Meanwhile Percy had been enquiring for a conveyance, but found that the little hamlet boasted of nothing better than a few heavy farm-carts.

"I tell you what you must do," he at last said to Lady Maud; my mare will carry a lady well. I will put your saddle on her, and you can ride home. Tibb will go to Drayton for the doctor, and I will stay with poor Merlin."

Lady Maud at first positively declined this arrangement; she wanted to fetch the veterinary surgeon herself. But Percy pointed out to her that Drayton, though only four miles off, was quite in the contrary direction to Joscelyn Park, that she could hardly gallop along the road like Tibb, and that if the surgeon were not at home she would not know where to find him. These arguments prevailed on her to abandon the idea, but then she wanted Percy to ride towards Joscelyn Park and leave her with her horse. Again he had to argue that she would not be able to attend to the poor beast as well as himself, and that she had better ride home as fast as possible and send assistance. Finally she consented to mount Destiny, and, Tibb having galloped off for the doctor, she very unwillingly turned the mare's head towards home.

"You will do all you can for him, Mr. Fitzclarence, won't you?" were her last words. "I am so sorry you lost the finish."

"I will do my best for Merlin, Lady Maud," he answered. "Never mind the finish. Better than seeing the fox killed," he added, to himself. "What a delightful girl!"

VII.

He followed her down the lane with his eyes. She put the mare into a canter, and her body swayed gracefully from side to side with the horse's motion. But as she turned the corner, and was about to disappear from his sight, there was a sudden pause. Either the mare had stumbled or Lady Maud had fallen forward. At any rate, Percy rushed down the village to find out. The women and children, too, who had been attracted by the sight of a lady riding down their quiet street, ran out to see what was the matter. Percy arrived in time to find the girl leaning against the horse, who was standing as quiet as a lamb. She was pale as death, paler still than she was when she fell, and she pressed her hand to her heart—

"I have had a sudden faintness," gasped she. "I am better now; let me get on again."

Percy, of course, could not allow this for a moment. He supported her with his arm, and selecting the cleanest-looking of the numerous female spectators, he asked her whether she could accommodate the lady in her cottage. There were at once several volunteers, and with the assistance of the women he led the half-fainting girl into one of the humble but cleanly tenements.

"Loosen her habit, and do what is necessary," said Percy sharply to the woman; "and turn these children out of the room. It is Lord Sevenoaks' daughter; she has had a bad fall, and you see she is fainting. Get some cold water. Now stir yourself a little." And then he himself drove the idle spectators from the room, and waited outside while a couple of good-natured but stupid women tried to revive Lady Maud, who had become quite unconscious. A crowd of urchins, of course, collected, the biggest of whom had charge of Destiny. Percy was now in sore trouble. He felt very doubtful as to the knowledge or experience of the peasant-women, and yet delicacy forbade his interfering in the matter. How could he, a perfect

stranger, adopt the necessary means to restore to animation Lady Maud, whose fall had probably hurt her more than she supposed? After a few minutes he opened the door slightly, and inquired how she was getting on.

"She is coming round, sir," said one of the women.

"She will come round a great deal quicker if you open the window," said Percy, who noticed that the cottage kitchen was stuffy and close, as English country people generally keep them.

"She will catch her death of cold, poor lady," answered a voice from inside. "We have had to take her habit off."

"Open the window, you stupid," insisted Percy, sharply. "It won't do her any harm; I will answer for the consequences."

And then, somewhat reassured, he took Destiny's bridle and led her back to the yard where he had left poor Merlin. He soon decided what was the best course to pursue. Putting his own saddle back on Destiny, he at once galloped off towards Joscelyn Hall. Much to his delight, before half a mile had been covered, a figure appeared in the distance, which soon turned out to be Dr. Biggs.

"Where are the hounds?" cried the old doctor, almost before he was within hearing.

"Never mind the hounds," shouted Percy in return. "Lady Maud has had a bad fall, and she is in one of those cottages. Come along."

They turned back, and Percy hastened to put Biggs in possession of all the facts. He left him with the patient, and having heard that Lord Sevenoaks himself could not be far off, proceeded in search of him. After many enquiries, and more than half an hour spent in riding up and down lanes and through gates, he at last descried his lordship's grey trotting along in the distance. Of course, the first question asked was again "Where are the hounds?" and Percy had once more to tell the story of Lady Maud's fall, of which, however, he made much lighter than to the doctor. Both galloped back to the hamlet together, and found Dr. Biggs on the threshold of the cottage.

"Lady Maud is all right," cried he as soon as he saw them. "Her back is slightly sprained, and the shock made her faint; but a few days' rest will quite set her up again. Only she must not ride home, and I would rather she did not drive in one of the wretched dog-carts which is the only conveyance we can find about here."

"I will send for the brougham," said Lord Sevenoaks.

"Whom will you send?" asked the doctor. "I don't want to leave her at present."

"I will go," volunteered Percy at once. "Please give me a card, Lord Sevenoaks, mentioning what carriage you want, and I won't pull up till I get to Joscelyn Hall."

Lord Sevenoaks first went in to see how his daughter was getting on. He found her resting on the poor woman's bed, very pale, rather dishevelled, but quite conscious.

"How is Merlin?" was her first question.

Now, his lordship had not thought about Merlin at all, nor would he stop to enquire just then. He scribbled a few instructions on the back of Percy's card, and the latter galloped off as fast as Destiny would carry him. Soon after his departure Farmer Tibb arrived with the veterinary surgeon, and Merlin's wound was declared not to be dangerous. "The flesh only was injured," said the vet, "and the horse will be all right in a few weeks." This news, which Lord Sevenoaks conveyed to his daughter, did more than anything else to restore her.

It was a long ride to Joscelyn Hall, and Destiny was covered with foam when they entered the stable yard. The card he bore procured him instant attention. Neither Lord Algernon nor Captain Wentworth had yet returned. They were probably scampering after the hounds miles away, for a stern chase is proverbially a long one. The brougham was very soon ready, and Percy got on the box to point out to the coachman the cottage where the invalid was resting. But notwithstanding all exertions, it was four o'clock before they at last reached the village. Percy had been sharp enough to have wraps and cloaks put into the carriage, and Dr. Biggs was able to clothe his patient warmly

without having to weary her with dressing. Lord Sevenoaks and Lady Maud being put inside, Dr. Biggs proposed to mount the box, while Percy undertook to ride the doctor's old horse back to Joscelyn Hall. This sedate animal did not at all understand our hero's impatience, and took his time very leisurely, notwithstanding the infliction of various kicks with the blunt rowels. Percy was much longer on the road than Lord Sevenoaks' fast pair, all the more that he waited for the vet's final opinion and Farmer Tibb's company. Darkness had therefore already set in when he at last reached Joscelyn Hall thoroughly tired, but with still five miles before him. Now, anybody else would probably have waited about the place to inquire after Lady Maud on the chance of being invited in. Percy, however, knew better. He simply asked the coachman how Lady Maud was getting on, and having received a satisfactory answer, he scribbled on the back of a card the words "Merlin is rapidly improving," told the man to give it to Lord Sevenoaks, mounted Destiny, and rode home.

Next morning, after rather a late breakfast, for he had been thoroughly knocked up by his various gallops of the previous day, Percy rode off to Monkfields on Kismet. Merlin was very much better, and the small farmer who had been out the day before, attended the horse as well as his limited intelligence would allow. The vet, too, had already been, and expressed himself satisfied with the patient's progress. Again Percy abstained from calling at Joscelyn Hall on his way, feeling sure that someone would come over about the horse before long. Nor was he wrong. It was two o'clock in the afternoon when Lord Algernon came up to his sister's room with good news of her favourite hunter.

"I have just come back from Monkfields," said he. "I think Merlin can be moved to-morrow. There was some fellow over there this morning looking after him. Do you know who it can be, Maud?"

"Probably the veterinary surgeon," answered Lady Maud, who was still on a sofa in a loose morning gown, her fair hair hanging over her shoulders.

"No," said Lord Algernon; "there was some one there beside the vet—a gentleman, they said, who was with you yesterday."

"Mr. Fitzclarence, I suppose," suggested Maud, blushing slightly.

"That man is a beast," remarked Lord Algernon. "What does he mean always poking his nose into our business?"

"How unjust you are, Algy," said his sister. "Why, if it had not been for Mr. Fitzclarence, I don't know what I should have done. Fancy, if I had fainted with no one near except those stupid village people! Why, Mr. Fitzclarence picked me up when I rode poor Merlin so hard at that fence, and he gave me his own horse to ride home, and then fetched Dr. Biggs for me; and, by-the-bye, who fetched the brougham?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Lord Algernon sulkily.

Lady Maud rang the bell. Her maid entered. "Go and ask who fetched the brougham yesterday when I was at Monkfields," said Lady Maud.

The servant returned in a few minutes. "They do not know who it was, my lady; but the gentleman left a card for his lordship. He had got a scarlet coat on, and was riding Dr. Biggs's horse."

"Very well," said Lady Maud. Then when the maid had left the room, she said, "You see, that must have been Mr. Fitzclarence again. Fancy the poor man galloping all the way here twice over, for I am sure he did not come back in the brougham. What has made you take such a dislike to him, Algy?"

"I think he is a humbug," answered Lord Algernon. "He said he had hunted in county Kerry, and I am sure he never was there in his life."

"Nonsense," replied Lady Maud. "Humbug or not, he has been extraordinarily useful to me on two hunting days. He rides very well, and is very nice. I like him, and I shall get papa to ask him to dinner."

VIII.

THE next day was Sunday. On Monday morning, as Percy was preparing to ride Kismet to meet the staghounds, Lord Sevenoaks' portly form darkened the doorway of the Royal William. "Is Mr. Fitzclarence at home?" asked his lordship of Miss Polly cheerily.

"I believe he is, my lord," replied that young lady, who was always glad to see the kind old nobleman; "I will send and inquire."

Lord Sevenoaks then proceeded to ask after Mr. Lambert, Miss Polly's own well doing, and the progress of things generally. He put a few questions, intended to be sly, about Percy, but the answers were so full of praise that his lordship could find nothing in them to justify the suspicions his eldest son had not hesitated to express. Mr. Lambert, too, hearing of his lordship's visit, had appeared hat in hand, and confirmed all the favourable reports of the barmaid. "The very nicest gentleman," said Lambert, "that has ever stayed in this house, keeps nice horses, quiet servants, and pays his bill regular, never out late at night, and never takes a drop too much."

"Mr. Fitzclarence is coming down, my lord," said young Charles the second horseman, and the next moment Percy appeared ready to join the staghounds.

"How do you do, Mr. Fitzclarence?" said Lord Sevenoaks, extending his hand. "I am very sorry that I have not had an earlier opportunity of thanking you for your extreme kindness to my daughter. Why you must have knocked yourself up completely on Saturday, and your horse too, for that matter."

"Not at all," answered Percy. "The mare is quite well. What I was able to do for Lady Maud was, I assure you, a mere trifle. May I ask how she is?"

"Much better," answered Lord Sevenoaks, "but I don't think she will ride again for a few days. I will never let her go without a groom in future. The fact was, there was such a large party

from the Hall last Saturday that I really had not a spare horse. But the child rides a great deal too hard."

"The reason of the accident was," answered Percy, "that Merlin was not quite in condition. In another month he would have taken that fence and a good many more like it without the slightest difficulty."

"I dare say you are right," assented Lord Sevenoaks; "but I see you are going out hunting."

"I was just going to give my young one a gallop with the stag hounds," replied Percy. "Will you look round my horses?"

"With pleasure, but you must come over to Joscelyn Hall as soon as ever you can. I had hoped to bring you back to lunch to-day. However, I won't interfere with your sport. When will you come and dine?"

The two then went off to the stables, and having admired the horses, it was agreed that Percy should dine at Joscelyn Hall on the next evening, when, as Lord Sevenoaks said, he hoped that Lady Maud would herself be able to express her thanks.

The run of this Monday was not eventful. Fortune kept improving, and Kismet got a breather. So far Percy was thoroughly well satisfied with his stud, and reckoned on bringing out the young ones with the foxhounds shortly. What in fact satisfied him still better, was his progress with Lord Sevenoaks. He casually mentioned his invitation for the morrow to Mr. Fielding and a few of his other acquaintances, but made no fuss about it, and rode quietly and steadily with the foxhounds on the eventful morning, taking care however to return early. Omnibus had to take him over to Joscelyn Hall, where he found the family party, Captain Wentworth, Mr. and Mrs. Fielding, and their son. When he entered the drawing-room, Lady Maud, dressed in a high black silk, still pale from her recent indisposition, but smiling and gracious as ever, came forward and held out her hand. "I have never had the pleasure of being formally introduced to you, Mr. Fitzclarence," she said, "but you have introduced yourself in the best possible manner as a knight errant

helping damsels in distress. I thank you so much," she added, raising her large eyes as she looked into his face, "for your extreme kindness on Thursday and Saturday. You must have been perfectly knocked up, and you were as good to poor Merlin as you were to me."

"I hope the horse is better, Lady Maud," answered Percy. "But I assure you, I require no thanks for any little assistance I was able to render."

"Merlin is getting on very well," Lady Maud said; "I hope he will be all right in a few weeks."

Then Lord Algernon came in and shook hands with Percy sullenly. Wentworth, a very big fellow with a long drooping yellow moustache, which he was continually chewing, greeted our hero more cordially. He entertained an immense admiration for pluck and resource, and Percy had undoubtedly shown both. The dinner was pleasant and sociable. Although Mr. Fitzclarence took Lady Maud in, Lord Sevenoaks having given his arm to Mrs. Fielding, he addressed his conversation chiefly to the two elder gentlemen. Even the suspicious Algernon could not but admit that his behaviour was thoroughly modest and unassuming. Far from appearing to show any desire to make capital out of the services he had rendered, he on the contrary studiously turned the conversation as soon as the subject was mentioned. With Lady Maud he spoke but little, and then only in answer to her questions about the London season, the theatres, or recent books, in the more serious of which she took great interest. He had read a great deal, and managed to condense much information, not without a slight spice of satire, in his brief answers to her questions. When the ladies retired, and Mrs. Fielding had ensconced herself in a comfortable armchair by the fire in the small drawing-room, Mr. Fitzclarence's virtues were at once put on the tapis by the enthusiastic banker's wife.

"What a delightful young man," said she, "so well informed, and so polite to his elders. And he is high church, too!"

Lady Maud did not reply. She was staring vacantly into the

fire, perhaps thinking of Captain Wentworth's recent appeals to her to fix the day which was to make him happy.

"If it had not been for the accident," thought she, "he would probably have repeated his request in a still more urgent form." And if he had done so last Friday she might probably have at last consented. Wentworth was by no means her ideal, but then she had never met with anyone who came nearer to it. She liked him very much, and, there being no one at hand to eclipse him, she would probably have ended by accepting him. But had not something altered her feelings on that last hunting day? Yes, on Saturday evening she would have had the courage to refuse. She would not even confess to herself that Percy's gallant bearing, his bright talk, and, above all, his kind, clever, and gentle courtesy had made an impression; but somehow she felt that Wentworth's charm was failing.

The rest of the evening passed away pleasantly enough. Lord Sevenoaks and Percy had a long political talk in which Mr. Fielding joined, and then the conversation turned to agriculture and the land laws, on which his lordship found the London man perfectly sound.

"A singularly well-informed gentlemanly young fellow," was Lord Sevenoaks's verdict when Percy, at an unusually early hour, got into his dog-cart. "I am quite surprised to find a London man so thoroughly well up in farming and all matters pertaining to agriculture." With these words the old gentleman walked off to the smoking-room, to which his son followed him. Captain Wentworth, however, remained behind for a moment.

"Are you quite well, Maud?" said he, closing the door after them as she re-entered the drawing-room.

"Yes, thank you, I am quite well again," replied Lady Maud, sitting back in her arm-chair; "only a little tired."

"Not too tired to listen to me, I hope," said Wentworth.

"It depends on what you have got to say," replied the girl rather wearily.

"I am afraid it is nothing new to you," continued Wentworth,

taking her hand. "Maud, will you tell me whether I may hope? Can you not make up your mind?"

Lady Maud was silent.

"It is now nearly a year," Captain Wentworth went on, "since I first asked you to be my wife. I love you no less now than I did then; much more, indeed. You have always put me off and put me off. Will you not at last make me the happiest man in the world?"

Lady Maud shook her head.

"You know," said Wentworth, still urging her, "nothing would please Lord Sevenoaks more. He told me only yesterday that it rested entirely with you, and that we might be married in the spring if it pleased you. My dearest, will you decide?"

"I have decided," at last answered Maud, in a low voice.

"Shall it be in the spring, then?" asked Wentworth, pressing her hand gently.

"No, Captain Wentworth," replied she, withdrawing from his grasp; "neither in the spring, nor ever."

"What?" he asked, almost angrily.

"I have made up my mind," she answered. "I could not make you happy."

"You must let me be the judge of that, dear Maud."

"No, Captain Wentworth," she went on, "your judgment would be partial. I know I could not make you happy; please take this as my firm conviction."

"Is there any one else you like better?" asked the gallant Captain, biting his moustache.

Maud hesitated. "You have no right to ask me," she said.

"Then there is?" he inquired, sharply.

"No, there is not;—there is nobody. But that does not alter matters. Really, Captain Wentworth, it is impossible."

"Is this final, really?" he enquired, his voice almost choked with emotion. "Will you not change your mind?"

"No," she said. "You must take take this 'no' as definite. If you care about me at all, please do not ask me again, as it is of no use. It always will be 'No.' Good night."

Then she moved slowly from the room, leaving Captain Wentworth with his head buried in his hands, thoroughly unmanned.

IX.

The events of the next few weeks need not be recorded in detail. There was a great deal of covert hunting with the South Loamshire hounds, and scarcely one good run. Percy brought out the young ones once or twice, and seriously began training Kismet for a steeple-chase. Lady Maud did not, of course, for a short time, appear in the field at all, and when she resumed riding she came out on a steady old cob of Lord Sevenoaks's. Poor Wentworth left the Hall on the day after Percy's first dinner there, and it need scarcely be remarked that Lord Algernon was very much annoyed when he ascertained the cause of his cousin's departure. Lord Sevenoaks merely observed that the child must have her way, and that he had no intention of forcing her inclination, although he would have been well pleased if she had taken Wentworth. "They were going up to town," he remarked, "in April, as soon as the Hunt Steeple Chases, which always took place in Joscelyn Park, were over. Lady Maud might then find some one she liked better than poor Wentworth, and at any rate she would have plenty of opportunities of meeting eligible young men." This was his philosophy, and would probably have been his philosophy in any case, but what strengthened his views was a conversation he had with his daughter.

She had declared frankly that though she liked and esteemed Captain Wentworth thoroughly, she could not marry him. "The fact is, dear papa," she said, "you know he is very slow —I mean rather stupid. You are such a dear, clever old papa, that you have quite spoiled me, and I get tired of men who cannot talk of anything but horses and hunting. Now, Captain Wentworth is a dear, good creature, but you know he really has not got two ideas in his head, and I think if I had to live with

him entirely I should get so tired of him that I should run away. Now don't let us talk about him any more, but come and listen to Grant-Duff's last article in the *Nineteenth Century*. You know we began it last night."

There was a good deal of truth in Lady Maud's opinion. Captain Wentworth was one of the best fellows in the whole world, and not by any means a fool. But he was entirely devoid of that higher species of education which the young ladies of the present age think themselves entitled to expect. He never opened a book if he could help it. He had passed his military examinations by a mere fluke and with much difficulty, and he had thrown up the Service as soon as his father died, because too much reading was expected of him. He was sharp enough to examine his agent's accounts and to avoid being cheated; but, beyond this and a certain amount of agricultural knowledge acquired by practice, his intelligence did not soar. Lady Maud, on the contrary, not only rode, but read and painted and studied. She had all the magazines down, and mastered even the more abstruse articles in the reviews. She had learned a little Latin from her brother's tutor, and was able to understand a quotation from Horace. In short, she was what would have been called, thirty years ago, a superior woman. It was no wonder, then, that when the weather put a stop to outdoor amusements the time she had to spend with Captain Wentworth seemed to move but very slowly. It was almost a relief to her, when the frost came on in the beginning of December, that he was no longer in the house. She was not obliged to make herself agreeable and conceal her yawns when he spent an afternoon lolling about her boudoir, moving from window to arm-chair, and from arm-chair to sofa. She could spend the time reading or painting or looking after Lady Georgiana's lessons. Percy was not an infrequent visitor. He was always welcome to Lady Maud as well as to her father. He came far too seldom for Lord Sevenoaks, who was constantly urging him to dine and even to spend Sunday at the Hall; but he continued to be very shy. Whenever he did come, which was only after

urgent solicitations, he devoted himself as much as possible to his lordship. He brought Lord Sevenoaks all the newest books on subjects interesting to him. He discussed the latest news with him, and, having on one occasion volunteered to write a letter for him when his lordship had gout in his fingers, he was afterwards often appealed to to use his powers as a correspondent. In fact, during the long frost, when the roads were slippery and Lord Sevenoaks somewhat ailing, Percy spent several successive mornings at the Hall assisting the old gentleman by writing a lot of letters, which were rather above the form of Mr. Walker, the agent. There was a political question being discussed at this time which created much dissension in county constituencies. Lord Sevenoaks, who was very anxious that Lord Algernon should stand for South Loamshire at the next vacancy, was unable to induce his son to enter into his views; and, being determined that the present member should not be returned again if he could help it, his Lordship was looking for another candidate. In his correspondence on this subject Percy was invaluable. His style was fluent, and his knowledge of politics considerable. He was able to write exactly the sort of letter required, whether to a neighbouring landowner, to a conservative agent in London, to one of the chiefs of the party, or to a political opponent whom it was necessary to conciliate. Lord Sevenoaks had nothing to do but give a hint as to the meaning he wished to convey, and in a very few minutes Percy appeared with the right thing put on paper in the right manner. Nothing remained but for his lordship to sign, and this he did most willingly. Lord Algernon considered the house rather dull during the frost, and without his friend Wentworth, so he went off to London, and was much surprised on his return to find Percy installed like a tame cat, in and out of Lord Sevenoaks' library at all hours, and on the most friendly terms with Lady Maud. He himself could not have written the sort of letter in an hour which Percy knocked off in five minutes. Nor was hand-writing his *forte*. On the contrary, though very clever and fairly well educated, the mere mechanical effort of penmanship was

thoroughly distasteful to him. It was therefore not easy to oust Percy from the position he occupied: particularly as the latter took no advantage whatever of it. He generally walked or rode back to Drayboro' as soon as Lord Sevenoaks no longer required him. He seldom stayed to lunch unless he was likely to be again wanted in the afternoon. When not hunting and not at the Hall, he was always busy on some errand for his lordship, or some commission connected with Lady Maud's studies, her music, or her flowers. Once or twice he joined her in skating on the pond, but then only when several others were present, and when the ladies of the party had made a point of keeping him there. Still Lord Algernon could not get over his dislike to the new-comer, and the more his father praised him the less did he like him. Lady Maud said very little about Percy. She listened when he talked to her father. She occasionally conversed with him on literature or other subjects, and she always insisted upon his coming to the stables to look at Merlin, who was now getting quite sound again. She trusted him implicitly, and appealed to him to help her in selecting books, in ordering music, and even in treating horses. But she did not join in his praises, nor did she defend him when, as was not unusual, Lord Algernon grumbled at his constant presence. Only occasionally she flashed curious glances at her brother. Sometimes she might be observed to flush up a little, and once she remarked: "Well, he is not in your way, Algernon, and he would not be here if you could write a decent letter yourself."

"Better make him your private secretary at once." Lord Algernon answered, turning to his father. "Offer him bed, board, and a pound a week, and I am sure he will take it."

"That is not at all a bad idea," Lord Sevenoaks replied reflectively, taking the suggestion quite seriously. "But I am afraid he would not be satisfied with a pound a week."

To the surprise of his children who, however, only knew of the whole affair after it was all arranged some time afterwards, Lord Sevenoaks asked Percy to accept the post of private secretary to him at a salary of £300 a year.

"I am sorry," said the old nobleman, "that I cannot well afford to offer you a higher sum. Your services are quite invaluable to me. I am much obliged to you for what you have done for me, and what you have done for my daughter can, I feel, never be repaid. But I cannot allow you to go on any longer wasting your time with an old man like myself. You have often said that you are not very well off. The greatest men have risen from positions similar to the one I now offer you. Will you accept the place purely as a temporary one?"

Percy was really and truly confounded. He had never expected to have so favourable an opportunity of pushing his schemes.

After a few minutes' hesitation, which was clearly expressed on his face, Lord Sevenoaks continued, "I see you are rather offended, and you don't like to say so. The fact is, my dear young friend, there is nothing menial in what I offer you. You need not even live here if you do not like. Keep your rooms at the Royal William for the present, and by-and-by you may have one of the cottages, which I will get nicely done up for you. You may hunt as often as you like, so long as you do not go across country to those beastly stag hounds. What I can give you is I know quite insufficient for a man of your tastes, but if you will only devote to me three mornings a week and an occasional hour when your hunting for the day is over I shall be quite satisfied, and you will have a little addition to your income. I won't call you my private secretary if you do not like. You shall continue to be what you are now—my friend, and I trust you will remain my friend in any event."

With these words the old gentleman held out his hand, which Percy grasped cordially, not without some qualms of conscience. It was some time before he could master his emotion. The temptation of constant opportunities of being near Lady Maud was enormous. The salary, too, though scarcely enough to pay for his horses' corn, would be a valuable addition to his income, for his funds were getting low, and he knew that the tiara of diamonds would be pronounced by connoisseurs to be only a

very good imitation. There was not very much money to be raised on that.

"Lord Sevenoaks," he answered at length, "I really do not know how to thank you."

"Do not thank me, my boy," interrupted his lordship, "but accept."

"I fear," continued Percy, "that I should not give your lordship satisfaction. I have not been used to much office-work, and I am afraid that my sporting propensities would interfere with your business."

"Not a bit of it, my lad," repeated Lord Sevenoaks. "Now do not hesitate any longer. It is a bargain, is it not?" And again he stretched out his hand.

Then Percy replied, conquering his last doubts, "It is a bargain, my lord."

X.

It was soon discovered that Percy's residence at the Royal William was incompatible with his new position. Lord Sevenoaks found him so useful, and got so accustomed to refer everything to him, and to appeal to him on every possible occasion, that he was miserable when the young man was not about the place. It was therefore arranged that he should occupy a pretty little cottage about half-a-mile from the Hall, which had formerly been the huntsman's when Lord Sevenoaks' father kept the hounds, which was about forty years before. The move took place just after Christmas, and for several weeks everything went on as smoothly as possible. Percy's horses were kept in some disused nag stables near the cottage, which Lord Sevenoaks had had repaired for our friend. Their keep, Percy stipulated, was to be entirely at his own charge, and on this point the old gentleman gave way. Nor would Percy accept the offer of board at the Hall. An old housekeeper whom he found at Drayboro, and Charles, the second horseman, attended to his wants; and the woman was able to cook him even a decent dinner on occasion. There was always the greatest difficulty in inducing him to dine at the Hall. Nor did Lord Algernon's conduct make the evenings he *did* spend there over pleasant. Frequent kind glances and gentle words from Lady Maud did something to soften the sting of Lord Algernon's covert satire; but it stung nevertheless, and Percy was not thick-skinned. Genuine gratitude to Lord Sevenoaks, as well as policy, prevented his ever taking notice of the young man's innuendoes. The position, however, was a difficult one, and was only somewhat improved by the arrival of Wentworth, whom Algernon persuaded to come down on the distinct understanding that he was not to repeat his offers to Lady Maud, for she had stipulated that he should return on the old cousinly terms only.

During these weeks Lady Maud had become so accustomed to Percy's presence, so used to appeal to his clear head and

strong arm on every possible occasion, that it almost seemed to her as if it had never been otherwise. Was there a poor woman to look after in the village, or a matter to be arranged which could not be entrusted to a servant? Percy did it, and did it well. Was there a dispute between the schoolmaster and the clergyman, or a row between the recipients of Lord Sevenoaks' and his daughter's bounty? Percy settled it. He gave a lecture to the school children on chemistry, with practical examples; and one to the workmen at the "Blue Lion," on Reciprocity, illustrated with amusing accounts of his travels. He paid special attention to Lady Maud's own horses, and the ponies were now always roughed and ready to go in frosty weather; while illness disappeared from the stable. Any trifle which Lady Maud had expressed a passing wish for—perhaps without much thought at all—was always sure to be there the next day, though he who had procured it appeared unconscious of having done so. That this constant unobtrusive attention, and this entire devotion to herself and her father, produced a very decided effect on Lady Maud, is not surprising. She was grateful, and her gratitude grew daily warmer.

In February, just before Lent, there was to be a ball at the Hall. Percy made himself extremely useful in assisting in the arrangements, ordering things from London, writing letters, directing envelopes, superintending upholsterers, and attending to the many other matters which require personal attention in the country at a great distance from experienced tradesmen and the lavish supplies of the metropolis. During these days he was naturally thrown much in contact with Lady Maud, and he could not avoid being present when some of the younger men among the neighbours came over to call on her and ask her for dances beforehand. One afternoon he was in the ball-room, having some of those flimsy draperies nailed up which look so tawdry in the day, but light up so well at night. He was standing on a ladder, while Lady Maud and her little sister were watching the effect from below. A servant came in, and announced: Mr. Fielding, junior.

"Will you take No. 3, or Nothing?"

"Oh, show him in," exclaimed Lady Maud. "I don't mind his seeing our beautiful decorations; he is such an old friend."

Mr. Fielding, who, like his father and most other Drayboro' people, had been much surprised at the turn events had taken with respect to the secretaryship, just nodded to Percy after having saluted the young ladies.

"I have ridden over," said he, "to ask you to put my name down on your card, Lady Maud. I know it will be hopeless to get a dance if I wait till the day after to-morrow. What will you give me?"

"I have only two left," answered Lady Maud. "You shall have one of those, if you like."

"Only one!" complained Fielding. "Do spare the second as well."

"I cannot," answered she. "I must keep something in reserve for a chance stranger to whom it may be necessary to be polite."

"But," continued Fielding, "who on earth has monopolised all the other dances?"

"Never mind," answered Maud, "they are all gone. Will you take No. 3, or nothing?"

"Well, of course," said Fielding, "if you put it that way, I will take No. 3, but I had hoped for at least another."

The conversation continued for a few minutes in this tone, and then Lady Maud turned her visitor out, being, as she said, anxious to finish the room that afternoon. When he had gone, Percy came down from the ladder.

Lady Georgiana having run away on some childish errand, Maud looked full at Percy, and said: "Why have not you asked me for a dance? You deserve some reward for your hard work."

"Because I am not coming," answered Percy.

"Not coming?" inquired Maud. "What do you mean?"

"It would scarcely do for me to come," replied he.

"Nonsense," she interrupted. "Why you are one of our best friends. At least, I know you are papa's, and I hope you are mine."

"Indeed, I trust so," answered Percy.

"At any rate, you have shown yourself a true friend," continued Maud. "Then why should not you come?"

"Don't you understand?" inquired he, looking at her face.

She blushed, and cast her eyes down. "No!" she said, in a low voice.

"Then I must explain," he continued. "If I had remained at the Royal William in an independent position, I should have come with pleasure; but now, as your father's secretary, although the position is honourable, and he has been the kindest friend I ever had"—he spoke these words with true feeling—"I really cannot come."

"You are too sensitive," said the girl, raising her eyes to him. "Nobody thinks any the worse of you for your having been good enough to assist my father."

"You are wrong," answered he. "Even young Fielding, who used to be so friendly and kind, scarcely notices me now."

"You surely do not pay attention to the conduct of an ill-mannered country lout! I beg you to come," she added, appealingly, "for my sake." She felt that the ball would be nothing to her without him, who had contributed so largely towards its success.

"To see you dance with all the country louts like Fielding?" asked he, almost bitterly.

"Not for that only," she replied. "You shall dance with me if you will. See, I have kept these for you," and she held up the little card of which Fielding had before vainly endeavoured to get a glance.

There were four blank spaces marked with little crosses.

"The cross means you," she said; "and you deserve it for being so cross," she added, playfully. "Now you will come, won't you, and swallow your pride?"

"I will," he answered. "Good-bye."

"Mind you are early," cried Lady Maud after him. "There is a lot to do yet, and I think papa must get on without you for a day or two."

XI.

Carriages began to draw up rapidly. The whole park was alive with the crunching of gravel, the tramping of horses, and the shouting of footmen. There were a number of spectators, too, for whom Lord Sevenoaks, with his usual kindness, had provided refreshments at the Home Farm. Not only the tenants, but even the labourers and the labourers' children came to see the grand folks assemble. People drove over as much as sixteen miles, and many came down all the way from London. The Royal William, the Eagle, and the Lion were all as full as they could hold. Mr. Fielding, Dr. Biggs, and many other friends had their houses laid under contribution. The old Hall was brilliantly lighted up, and, thanks to Percy's exertions, decorated in the most exquisite taste. The porch and corridors were lined with flowers, for Percy, having found his lordship's hot-houses insufficient, had ordered a van load by train from town, for which he had paid secretly out of his private purse. The most perfect bouquet that Covent Garden could produce had arrived for Lady Maud from an anonymous donor. It was all pure white, and was accompanied by a smaller one of the same hue, for little Lady Georgiana. During the day many others poured in for the daughter of the house. They were red, and white, or mixed, or variegated, and bore the cards of their various donors, but none were so pretty as the anonymous one. Percy dined quietly at his cottage, and drove Omnibus over to save his dress boots. He was still busy with the final arrangements when the band struck up. Lady Maud was going to give him the fourth dance, and until it came he was free. He had not yet seen her, for his work had taken him into other parts of the house. When he came into the room his eyes sought her in the crowd, and after some minutes he saw her graceful form bowing to the arrivals, and shaking hands cordially as they came in. She wore white with bunches of spring violets on different parts of her dress.

In her hand was a white bouquet. As Percy noticed this a violent flush rose to his face. Waiting his opportunity, he came up to her, and, shaking hands, inquired whether there was anybody she wished him to dance with. "Some wretched girl," said he, "who cannot get a better partner than a private secretary."

"How can you be so bitter?" she said, looking at him almost beseechingly. "See this bouquet; is it not lovely?" and she raised the flowers to his face.

"Beautiful," he said, "who sent it?"

"I know," she said, smiling, "but I shall not tell. If you want to be good-natured, dance with Gertrude Summers. There she is."

He was inclined to be good-natured, and danced in succession with three of the ugliest girls whom it had been his fate to meet. Nor did the grace of their movements compensate for their entire want of beauty. When the ordeal was over, he claimed No. 4 from Lady Maud. It was a waltz; and as he spun round the room holding the lovely girl in his arm, he could not but wish that such a waltz should last through his whole life. It was difficult for him to talk common-places at this time. Lady Maud noticed his abstraction.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked. "Do you find yourself slighted now?"

"Indeed not," he answered; "thanks to you, kind and gracious being."

"Well then," she said, "be cheerful, and don't fancy yourself looked down upon when nobody dreams of such a thing."

The dance was over. Another still more ecstatic one followed later on. When this, too, was done, "Help me to see the old people into supper," said Lady Maud: and both worked hard, with the assistance of Lord Algernon, who on this occasion forgot his sulks, as he was much caressed and *fêted* by all the ladies of the neighbourhood.

"Who is going to take you into supper?" asked Percy of his fair partner when most of the dowagers had filed off.

"Oh!" answered she, "I am not hungry yet. We will have our supper when the people are gone. Let us go into the conservatory now, if you don't mind. I have not even seen it to-night, and everybody says it is so pretty. I suppose you have been at work there again. Now the old people are eating and the young ones are dancing, I can look round a little in my own house."

She put her arm into Percy's, and led him into the glass-house. It was fragrant with flowers, and dimly lighted with Chinese transparencies.

"How lovely," she said, sitting down on a sofa among the shrubs. "How well you have arranged it! A thousand thanks for your assistance. I don't know what we should do without you."

Percy sighed.

"What makes you so sad to-night?" said she, "when everybody is so merry."

"Lady Maud," he answered, hesitatingly, "I have very bad news to tell you. Bad news, I mean, for me," he said, hastily seeing her change colour.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I must go," he answered.

"Leave us! Why?" she asked, hastily.

"I cannot tell you why, Lady Maud, but I must."

"But if the reason is a good one, surely you can tell me."

"I really cannot."

"You must not leave your best friends like that. You said my father was your best friend."

"Indeed he is."

"Then why go? When do you mean to go?"

"To-morrow," he replied.

"To-morrow?" She pressed her hand to her forehead. "Will you not tell me why?" she asked again.

"It is impossible," he answered. "The highest, best reasons make it imperative for me to go, and the same reasons prevent me from telling you why."

"Very well," she at last said; and even in the dim light Percy could see she was almost of a deathly pallor.

Suddenly a flush came to her face. "I know who sent me this bouquet," she said, in a playful voice. Now, Mr. Fitzclarence," she said, mustering up her courage, "you must not go."

He only shook his head.

"I know why you want to leave us. Give me your hand."

He obeyed.

"Now," she said, "will you grant me one favour?"

"What favour could I refuse you?" asked he in reply.

"You refused a very small favour I asked you just now: not to leave us."

"Ah," he answered, "then, as I told you, I have motives of the gravest nature. Do you think I would leave this house, where Lord Sevenoaks has treated me better than any father could, where you have been so kind, so full of interest——" and he stopped, unable to go on.

She, too, was silent for a few moments.

"Yes," she said; "I quite understand. All I ask is that you should put off your departure for three days. Say nothing of your plans to my father. Wait till Monday morning. Will you do this for me?"

"I will," answered he.

"Now we had better go back to the ball-room." As she took his arm she picked a white camelia. "Will you have this?" she asked. "Let me put it in your button-hole. And now," she said, "go and dance and make yourself useful. Remember! not a word until Monday."

XII.

BIGGS was much surprised on the morning after the ball to see young Charles appear in his surgery.

"If you please, sir," said the groom, "master's compliments, and he would like to see you." At the same time he handed the Doctor a note, in which Percy asked at what time it would be convenient to Dr. Biggs to receive him, as he wanted to have a short interview on strictly private and important business, adding that he wished to consult him not as a patient but as a friend. The Doctor having appointed a time, Mr. Charles, who had the treat of riding the future steeple-chaser, Kismet, cantered back through the High Street, not without stopping at the "Royal William" on the way, "just to wet his whistle" and to exchange a few civilities with Miss Polly. The hotel was still full of the guests who had come down for the ball, and Miss Polly cut short her visitor's flowery speeches, and told him she was too busy to listen to his nonsense. Percy, therefore, received his answer a good deal sooner than would have otherwise been the case. At three o'clock he walked into Dr. Biggs' surgery.

"You don't look very bad," said the Doctor, shaking hands cordially. "Been dancing too much? Do you want a blue pill?"

"No," said Percy; "I have come to consult you upon a matter which affects my mind, not my body."

"Indeed!" said Dr. Biggs, more seriously. "I shall be glad if I can be of any use to you."

"Yes," continued Percy, "you can. You are, I think, one of the oldest friends of the Joscelyn family?"

"I think so," answered the Doctor.

"You are also Lady Maud's trustee?"

The old gentleman nodded.

"And," continued our hero, "you have been excessively kind to me during my stay here, and I believe I may reckon upon your friendship?"

"I hope so."

"Well," said Percy, "I have been considering to whom I should confide rather an important trust, and I have decided that I had better consult you, unless you should indeed repudiate my confidence."

"Not at all, my dear fellow," said the Doctor. "I shall be glad if I can be of any service to you. Sit down, please, and make yourself comfortable. I am not busy just now."

"The fact is, Doctor," Percy began, "I am obliged to go away."

"Why?" interrupted Dr. Biggs.

"I will tell you. Listen. Let me have my say and you may ask as many questions as you like afterwards. You are aware that I am not blessed with a very large income. Perhaps I live more extravagantly than that income warrants. You see my family always lived in a certain style, and it is difficult to break with habits which have been acquired early in life. However, let the cause be whatever it may, the fact remains—I am comparatively a poor man. Now, being a poor man, when Lord Sevenoaks made me a very handsome offer, in the most friendly manner, I accepted it in order to increase my income while

remaining in a country which I liked so much, because everyone has been so kind to me—yourself included. Now, Dr. Biggs, I am very near repaying the great goodness of Lord Sevenoaks by base ingratitude. The fact is, I am desperately in love with Lady Maud."

The Doctor almost jumped from his chair.

"Wait," said Percy. "Don't interrupt me yet. I am desperately in love with Lady Maud, but I know what honour demands of me. I am going away at once to avoid the slightest complication."

"The resolution does you great credit," said Dr. Biggs; "but I do not quite see the necessity for it."

"My dear Doctor," continued Percy, "if you were my age, if you spent several hours a day in the company of that divine creature, if you were constantly exposed to the kind glances of those wonderful eyes, if she spoke to you gently and almost affectionately as a real friend, why you would, like I am, be tempted to throw yourself at her feet and—make a consummate ass of yourself."

"Well, if you did," said Dr. Biggs, "what harm would there be?"

"What!" exclaimed Percy, his eyes suddenly brightening up.

"I mean what objection would there be?" continued the Doctor, "to her marrying you? I, as her trustee, should certainly raise no obstacle."

"It is only your kind heart which is speaking now," said Percy. "Your cool head would by-and-by take quite a different view. Lady Maud Joscelyn must marry a man of wealth and position, if not of title."

"As to wealth," answered the Doctor, "she has really ample means of her own, and need not seek a fortune in her husband. As to position, do you not belong to one of the oldest families in England?"

"Perhaps so," replied Percy, with a peculiar smile.

"Then what more can she require? Don't blush if I tell

you that you are good-looking, bold, withal sensible, and eminently qualified to make any girl happy. I am sure my ward could not do better even if she married a duke with millions. Then why do you run away? Try your luck like a man. Ask her, and if she won't have you, there is plenty of time to make a bolt of it then."

"My dear doctor," said Percy, extending his hand to the old gentleman, and cordially pressing the one tendered to him, "you speak like a true friend and a man of heart and feeling. But unfortunately for me, my sense of honour is very keen. I feel that I should be justly stigmatised as a fortune-hunting adventurer if I were to propose to Lady Maud. I could not live under such a reproach even if my friends did not join in it. No; I must go, and that at once. What I now ask of you is to explain to Lord Sevenoaks that I have left for good, and what my reasons for doing so were. Otherwise I should be under the imputation of ingratitude to my noble benefactor, an accusation which would be almost as bitter to bear as that of dishonour. You see, I cannot myself tell Lord Sevenoaks why I propose to leave him so abruptly."

"Indeed, you cannot," agreed Dr. Biggs.

"And there is more," added Percy, blushing. "Do not accuse me of vanity, dear doctor, nor of wishing to boast of my conquest. God forbid. But I must tell the whole truth now this once, and then be silent ever after."

"Certainly," said the doctor.

"I believe," continued Percy, hesitating, "that Lady Maud is not quite indifferent to me."

"I should think it was very likely," observed the doctor, drily.

"She is not in love with me, I am thankful to say," Percy went on, "but forgive me if I add that I think she might fall in love with me if I were to stop hanging about that house any longer. This, of course, must ever remain a secret between us."

The doctor only smiled and nodded.

"Mind," Percy said, "I may be mistaken, but at any rate it is better to err on the side of prudence wherever a lady is concerned. If that lady be the object not only of one's violent love, but also of the most sincere respect and esteem, caution is doubly necessary. So you now see, don't you, that I have no option except to leave at once?"

The doctor did not quite see it, and half an hour was spent in arguing with his young friend on the subject. The good old man assured him repeatedly that he would use all his influence with Lord Sevenoaks to promote the engagement if only Percy would stop. But the latter was obdurate, and declared that his honour left him no choice—he must go. Finally, when Percy took his leave, Dr. Biggs promised to carry out his commission after his departure, but stipulated that he should remain three days more at least.

"Curious," said Percy to himself, as he left the surgery, and mounted his horse. "Dr. Biggs wants three days' time, just like Maud. I wonder if the two will meet in the interval?"

XIII.

They did meet. The next was a hunting-day, and Percy, who was determined to be ready for any contingency that might arise, took Kismet out to continue his training with the South Loamshire fox-hounds. Lord Algernon and Wentworth rode away from the Hall almost at the same time, but the former kept aloof from him, while the latter of course remained with his friend. Lady Maud was about to accompany her brother and cousin when Dr. Biggs rode up on his old bay.

"I thought you would be going to Crawford Woods," said he, "and so I decided I would ride over with you."

Lady Maud, who was always glad to see her trustee, was doubly glad of the opportunity of avoiding a ride between her

brother—who steadily sulked—and Captain Wentworth, who could not be restrained from excessive affection. It was, therefore, only natural that the two young men should ride on in front, while she and the doctor stopped behind. When they had cleared the avenue, and were well out of ear-shot, the doctor began:

"I was very sorry to hear yesterday that Fitzclarence wishes to leave us."

"Who told you?" she asked.

"He came himself to take leave of me," replied the doctor.

"I do not want him to go," said Lady Maud. "Nobody wants him to go. Papa will be desperate when he hears of it. Now his hand is so bad, I do not know what he will do without Mr. Fitzclarence; and Algernon is so often away. Besides, when he *is* here, he has not the patience to write letters, and go through accounts, and look after the tenants, like Mr. Fitzclarence. Oh, doctor, doctor," she added, almost piteously, "do persuade him to stay."

"I am afraid I cannot," answered Dr. Biggs. "I have tried my best."

"Do you know why he is going?" asked Lady Maud, with a tell-tale blush on her cheeks.

"Well," said the doctor, "I do, but the reason was entrusted to me in the strictest confidence."

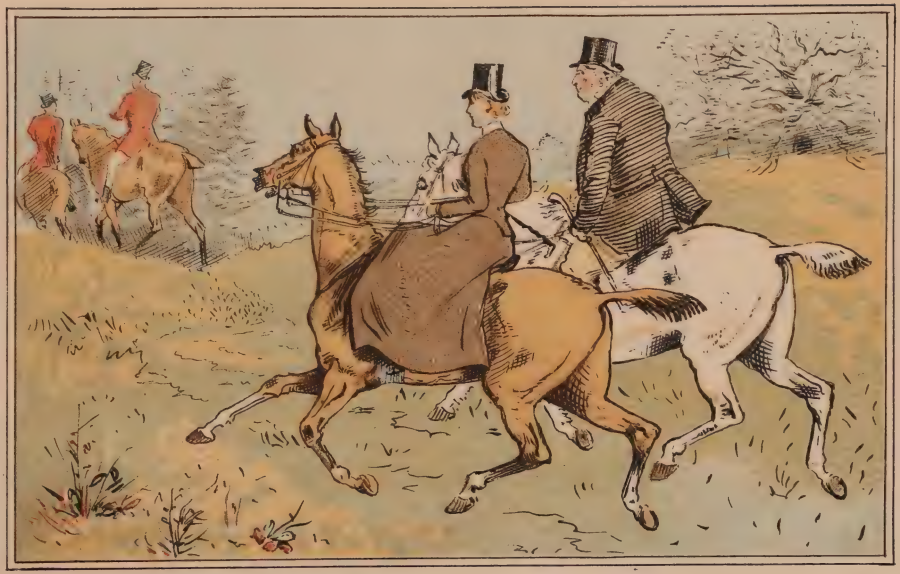
"Oh, you might tell me, doctor," she said, playfully. "You know I am your ward, and I ought to know all about it."

The doctor fenced with her for a long time, but she became more pressing in her entreaties.

At last he said, "Well, my dear, I cannot tell you, but perhaps you may guess the reason. Supposing a young man of small fortune, though unblemished name, were to fall in love with a great lady of wealth and position, say a princess, what ought he to do?"

"Ask her to marry him," answered Lady Maud, boldly.

"So *I* say," the doctor assented. "But Mr. Fitzclarence thinks otherwise. He says the young man in question ought to



"Come along, Doctor, let us join Algernon."

run away, to keep out of temptation. At least, his young man is going to run away."

"Then tell him from me," said Lady Maud, stooping over her horse's neck, "that his young man is a humbug, and that he should stop, and ask the great lady to marry him."

"But the great lady might refuse," said Dr. Biggs.

"I don't think she would," answered Lady Maud, turning her head entirely away, and urging Merlin into a canter. "Come along, doctor; let us join Algernon."

During the whole of that day Percy scarcely spoke to Lady Maud. He held open a few gates for her, he broke a top rail, he made a gap, and he called up her groom when he noticed that her girths wanted tightening; but all this as quietly and indifferently as possible. He rode even harder than usual, and tried Kismet's speed in a quick twenty minutes during the afternoon; but though Lady Maud herself clearly showed her readiness to have a long chat with him, he avoided every opportunity of doing so, and was always either in front or behind her.

Lord Sevenoaks was sitting in his library reading that morning's *Times*, which had just arrived, when Lady Maud walked in, in her riding-habit.

"Good evening, papa," she said, giving the old gentleman a kiss.

"Back already, my dear!" he enquired. "Where's Percy? I want him to attend to that matter of old Burton's. I wish he would come. Those fences ought to be looked after at once. Wasn't he out with you?"

"I believe he was," she answered, almost crossly; "but he might as well have been at home, for he scarcely spoke to me all day."

"What is the matter?" asked the old gentleman, surprised at her unusual tone. "You seem very much put out."

"So I am," she said, throwing her hat and whip on the table. "Papa, do you know that Mr. Fitzclarence wants to go?"

"Go, my dear?" the old nobleman enquired, painfully surprised. "Why?"

"I will tell you. He is going because he is a gentleman."

"What do you mean? Does he think himself ill-treated here? I am sure we do everything we can for him."

"Of course you do, you dear old papa," she continued, "and so do we all. But this is the matter." She went up to her father, and put both her hands on his shoulders. "Papa, dear," she said, "I want to marry Mr. Fitzclarence."

"Marry him!" exclaimed Lord Sevenoaks, aghast, dropping the *Times* from his gouty fingers. "Good heavens, my dear, what has put that into your head? Has he dared to propose to you?"

"No," she answered, sadly. "That is the reason he is going."

"Well, surely *you* have not proposed to *him?*" the old lord inquired, smiling.

"No, I have not,' answered Lady Maud, "but I almost think I shall."

"But do explain this riddle, my child. I really cannot make it out. If this young man has taken advantage of his position here to make love to you, he deserves to be kicked out at once, and he shall be."

"Papa," Maud cried, "he has never made love to me for a moment."

"Well, then?" and Lord Sevenoaks looked at her interrogatively.

"But he is very much in love with me, and he is afraid he would commit himself if he stopped. He has therefore decided to go at once."

"And a very wise decision, too," answered the old lord. "It will be very hard to part with him, but I am glad he is behaving so well."

"But he must not go," interposed Lady Maud.

"Why not?"

"Because—because—because I like him too much myself,"

stammered Maud, blushing; "and if you won't let me marry him, I shall be an old maid."

"But, my dear Maud," expostulated her father, "do be reasonable. The young man has not got sixpence. He is a mere nobody."

"Oh, yes, he has a great deal more than sixpence," she assured her father. "But even if he has not, I shall marry him, or no one."

"What?" asked Lord Sevenoaks; "even if I forbid you?"

"No, dear papa," replied she, humbly, again kissing him. "If you tell me I must not, I will obey you, but I shall not marry anybody else."

The conversation continued for some time longer. Lady Maud stuck to her declaration, and Lord Sevenoaks at last consented to consult Dr. Biggs.

XIV.

"I HARDLY like to trust you with the errand," said Lord Sevenoaks to Dr. Biggs, next morning, after they had been closeted together for nearly an hour; "you are so terribly fond of this young man."

"Oh, you may trust me," answered the doctor. "You see, I have to look after my ward. But here he is;" for Percy at that moment entered the library with a roll of papers under his arm, to attend to his morning's duties.

Dr. Biggs left the room with a friendly nod.

"My lord," began Percy, "I have got all these papers of Burton's arranged, and I have settled about the fences. I have also brought the last month's accounts for you to be good enough to look over. They are made out up to to-day."

"You need not have been in such a hurry about the accounts, Percy," Lord Sevenoaks said.

"I have put them together rather sooner than usual," replied

Percy, "because I am sorry to say, my lord, that I shall be obliged to leave Joscelyn Hall at once."

"Indeed?" Lord Sevenoaks asked, without showing the slightest surprise; "and may I ask, why?"

"Most important business summons me to town," Percy replied.

"Well, then, go and do your business, and come back."

"I am afraid that is impossible, my lord."

"We will see about that," answered Lord Sevenoaks. "Biggs," called he, opening the door, "just come in here. Have a talk with this young gentleman, and see whether he is really so determined to go as he pretends."

Percy was hustled into a small room adjoining, and found himself alone with the doctor.

"Now, my lad," said the latter, "it is all arranged."

"What is all arranged?" asked Percy.

"Well, if you can answer one or two questions, you may go and ask Lady Maud to be your wife at once, and she won't say no."

"Dr. Biggs," answered Percy, solemnly, standing up, and drawing himself up to his full height, "you have betrayed my confidence. I trusted you with the motive of my abrupt departure, and you have abused the trust in a most shameful manner. The highest rules of honour demand that I should go, and you know it."

"Pooh, pooh! my young friend," interrupted the doctor. "It is ridiculous to talk of the happiness of two lives being wrecked on a scrupulous point of honour. In my own ward's interest I could not allow such a thing. Just sit down, and be quiet."

Percy, however, affected extreme indignation. "It is no use, doctor; a penniless adventurer cannot marry Lady Maud Joscelyn. You had no right to make use of the secret I confided to you."

"The best right in the world, my dear fellow, for I am entrusted with that lady's fortune and her happiness; and I am

determined to preserve both as far as I am able. If I had kept your secret, her fortune would have been of no use to her, for she would be a miserable woman. She is just as fond of you as you are of her."

"Do you mean to say that?" asked Percy, eagerly.

"I do; and instead of blackguarding me, you ought to thank me for having cleared up matters. If you are good enough for her, why bother your head about your want of fortune, or your comparatively humble position? You have brains enough to get a good one by-and-by, and the Fitzclarences are an older family than the Joscelyns. Lord Sevenoaks thinks a good deal of county families. Ah, if you had been a mere Smith or Jones, it would have been a different matter; but as it is, you have nothing to do but to answer a few questions. In the first place, are you aware that Lady Maud has got a large fortune?"

"I have heard so," replied Percy, "and, as you know, that is one of the reasons why I cannot ask her to be my wife."

"Nonsense," again remonstrated the doctor. "As you say, you have not got anything. If she had not either, it would be a very poor look out. You may thank your stars she has got some money. Now I want to know if you would object to the whole of her fortune being strictly settled on her?"

"Of course not," answered Percy, "every sixpence should be settled on her; and mine as well—though it is small enough."

"There is no idea of that," remarked the doctor.

"But," said Percy, "if your scheme were ever carried out, if I were really to be so blessed as to obtain Lady Maud's consent, everything I have in the world, little as it is, should be her property entirely."

"Well, how much have you got?" asked Dr. Biggs.

"Something under £5000 in the hands of trustees," replied Percy. "Shall I give you their names?"

"That is unnecessary, just now," answered the doctor. "Anything else?"

"Well, there are the family jewels."

"What may they be worth?" inquired Dr. Biggs.

"I have not the slightest idea," Percy said. "Fielding has got them at the bank. He will tell you. There is not much, anyhow; perhaps a thousand pounds."

"Well," said Dr. Biggs, "a man cannot give more than he has got, and I think your suggestions are excessively handsome. Now just wait here, while I see Lord Sevenoaks."

It may be imagined that the next half-hour was not the least exciting in Percy's life. His whole fate trembled in the balance. On the result of the discussion behind that green-baize door depended whether he was to go forth a beggar without a future, or the affianced of a rich and noble lady. Never had thirty minutes seemed so long to him. At last the door opened. Lord Sevenoaks was sitting in his favourite arm-chair, while Dr. Biggs was walking up and down the library.

"Sit down, Mr. Fitzclarence," said Lord Sevenoaks. "I have just been having a long conversation with Dr. Biggs, and we have come to the conclusion that your conduct has been all that could be desired. Let me see! I understood you to say that you do not belong to the Herefordshire Fitzclarences?"

"I do not, my lord," replied Percy. "My father was scarcely true to the traditions of the race. He took to business in London, and I should perhaps have followed it if I had been able to bear trade, but I could not, and I am a poor man."

"Well, well," remarked Lord Sevenoaks. "You are not so dreadfully poor as all that. By the by, they say that horse of yours has got a very good chance for our steeple-chase."

"Oh," interrupted Dr. Biggs, "don't talk of steeple-chases now, my lord. Put the young man out of his misery. The fact is," continued the doctor, seeing that Lord Sevenoaks, whose consent had been obtained with so much difficulty, was not willing to repeat it to Percy, "the fact is, that Lord Sevenoaks will not object to your trying your luck with Lady Maud, and will accept you as a son-in-law if you are successful."

"My lord——" stammered Percy.

"There, there, that will do," interrupted Lord Sevenoaks. "Now go and look for Maud."

He had not far to look. She was perfectly aware of Dr. Biggs' visit, and of the long conversation which had taken place. She was sitting in her usual morning room, expecting the very man who came in—Percy.

"Lady Maud," he said, holding out his hand as he came in, "you asked me the other day not to go."

"Yes," answered she, blushing, "and I hope you are going to stay after all."

"It all depends upon yourself," he replied. "If you say 'no' I shall go this very day; if you say 'yes' I shall stop for, I hope, a very long time."

"What am I to say 'no' or 'yes' to?" she enquired.

He took her hand and looked into her face. Her eyes were cast down, and a deep blush rose up to her fair forehead.

"Can you not guess?" he asked in a low voice.

"I would rather you told me," she answered almost inaudibly.

"It is this then. I am a poor devil, I have nothing but my name and a couple of good horses. Yet your good father says that if I can win your consent I may become the happiest man in the world. I wanted to go because I would not play the part of a fortune-hunter. I will go now if you bid me. He and Dr. Biggs have told me to seek you here and take your decision from yourself. What is it to be?" And with these words he committed the old-world folly of sinking down on his knees before her, and looking up into her face for his answer.

"You may stop," she whispered, and bending her face down her lips met his in one long kiss.

XV.

Their engagement was very soon made public. Lady Maud, whose admiration for Percy had been so long repressed, extolled his nobility of character and his self-abnegation to all her friends,

while Dr. Biggs, his son, and even Mr. Fielding, joined in the chorus. According to them no nobler-minded young man had ever existed. He was ready to sacrifice everything on a mere point of honour. He had been about to leave Drayboro' and to abandon not only his pleasures but a most promising political career under the auspices of Lord Sevenoaks, simply because he was in love with his daughter and was too high-minded to propose to her. The good doctor assured everyone that he had had the greatest difficulty in preventing this excellent young man from carrying out his honourable but Quixotic purpose. Some of the younger men of course envied him, but the older ones and all the ladies were unanimous in his praises. Such good looks, such a good old name, such an admirable seat on horseback, such boldness in the field, such modesty of demeanour could not fail to command the admiration of all except that of disappointed rivals. Wentworth, true to his cousinly *rôle* and frank and loyal as he was, remained at the Hall, and, though with aching heart, was courteous and even friendly to Percy. Lord Algernon alone persisted in his sullenness. As soon as the engagement was announced he went off to town and made it his business to find out as much as he could of our hero's antecedents; while the latter, having opened his leather case at Fielding's, the bankers, took out a queer old-fashioned bracelet and a few other trifles as gifts to Lady Maud. Lord Algernon was not particularly successful in his enquiries in London. He found out nothing to the disadvantage of Percy, but on the other hand all he could discover to his advantage was that he had paid his landlady's bills regularly. He belonged to no club, and was unknown in all the circles to which Lord Algernon had access. No Mr. Fitzclarence had been seen in London society, nor did Burke's County Gentry give any information about Percy. The solicitors who acted for the money invested in the funds gave nothing but the driest bones of information. Mr. Percy Fitzclarence had the right to so and so much by his father's will, and that was all they would say, and Algernon not having been authorised by Lord Sevenoaks to make any further investigations,

could not insist upon being initiated into the past life of Mr. Fitzclarence, senior. He was in fact not particularly pleased with his reception at the solicitors' office. They were studiously polite, but when he asked inconvenient questions merely said that they had not been directed by their client to give Lord Algernon the information he asked for, although they would be happy to do so on receiving Mr. Fitzclarence's instructions. Now this of course was precisely what Lord Algernon could not obtain. His father and Dr. Biggs placed unlimited confidence in Percy, and their sense of honour was so strong that they would have allowed no enquiries to be made except with his full knowledge and consent. If Lady Maud discovered what her brother was about she would probably never speak to him again. Lord Algernon therefore returned to Joscelyn Hall after a fortnight's absence, very little wiser than when he left. There was on that day to be a big dinner party at his father's. It had been arranged with a view to introducing Percy to some of Lord Sevenoaks' relations and friends, for hitherto his acquaintances had almost been limited to the neighbours. Among the guests who were invited to stop at the hall for a day or two after the party was Lady Scatterton, a fashionable leader of a certain set in London, a woman no longer young but who still expected a good deal of admiration. She was the wife of Sir George Scatterton, most of whose time and money were spent on the turf, and was known to be chronically in a state of impecuniosity, partly owing to her husband's gambling propensities and partly to her own extravagance. As a first cousin, however, of the late Lady Sevenoaks, it was considered necessary to ask her down, and being a thorough woman of the world she made herself very agreeable to the party at Joscelyn Hall. At dinner she was placed opposite Percy and Lady Maud, and more than once she fixed upon the former so scrutinising a glance that he felt nervous under it. It struck him that he had seen the lady before, and when memory came to his aid during the progress of the banquet he wished he had not had that pleasure. The circumstances under which he had met her were by

no means pleasant, and he did not desire that they should now be recalled. He hoped that she did not recollect them, nor him, and when she ceased looking at him he began to believe that his hopes were realised. She gave him a very sweet smile when he held open the door for the ladies to retire after dessert, and as he resumed his seat he said to himself:

"Thank God she does not know me!"

When the ladies were assembled in the drawing-room Lady Scatterton sat down by Maud, who held in her hand a Japanese screen with which she warded off the heat of the fire. In holding up her arm the curious bracelet which Percy had given her was very apparent. Lady Scatterton's eyes were intently fixed upon it for some moments, while she continued talking of and praising Mr. Fitzclarence.

"That is a very curious bracelet you have on, my dear," said she, suddenly.

"Yes, is it not?" asked Lady Maud, innocently. "Percy gave it me. It is one of the Fitzclarence family jewels. It is very peculiar, but I like it."

"Yes, it is very curious indeed," assented Lady Scatterton, examining the bracelet. "I only remember to have seen one like it. A family jewel of the Fitzclarence's, is it?"

"Yes," answered Maud. "Percy has a number of very curious things which were left to him by his mother—queer old-fashioned lockets and ear-rings—some of them rubbish, but some, I believe, very valuable. But I like this one; there is a special style about it which you never see in modern jewellery."

And then they fell to discussing Percy's virtues, a subject on which Lady Maud was of course very eloquent. When the men came in Lady Scatterton said:—

"Will you introduce me to your paragon, my dear? I had not a chance before dinner. I should like to have a chat with him. You don't want him all to yourself, do you?"

"No," answered Maud, smiling; "on an evening like this I wish him to make the acquaintance of all my friends. Percy," added she, calling him, "let me introduce you to Lady Scatter-

ton," and she rose, making room for her lover to sit down on the sofa by her friend's side, while she moved away.

Percy, however, was in no hurry to avail himself of the vacant place. Lady Scatterton began the conversation in the usual society tone without appearing to have any recollection of ever having seen Percy before.

But, after a few minutes of banter, when he already began to feel relieved of his fears, she said, "Sit down, Mr. Fitzclarence, I want to speak to you."

He was obliged to obey.

She suddenly looked at him with a peculiarly penetrating glance of her black eyes. "Do you know a Mr. Fang?" she asked, abruptly, leaning over towards him till her lips almost touched his ear.

Percy flushed violently. "What do you mean, Lady Scatterton?"

"Yes, it is not so nice as Fitzclarence, is it?" she asked, with a singular intonation in her voice. "Then you don't remember Mr. Fang?"

"I cannot say I do," Percy said, feeling almost as if he would faint.

"Indeed!" she replied. "I am surprised, though of course you don't remember me?"

"How should I, Lady Scatterton?" he asked, feeling worse and worse.

"Nor going to Thomas's Hotel?" went on the unmerciful woman. "You don't remember Mr. Fang at all? Nor the money you brought me? Are you quite sure of it," she hissed into his ear, "Mr. Fang, Junior?"

He felt it was useless to prevaricate any longer. "For goodness sake, Lady Scatterton," he implored, "be quiet. Don't betray me. What good would it do you?"

"What good would it do me if I kept your secret?" asked Lady Scatterton. "Am I to let my cousin marry Mr. Peter Fang, Junior?"

"Hush! hush!" he answered. "The whole room will hear

you. Meet me, without attracting attention, in half an hour's time in Lord Sevenoaks's library," Percy said, summoning all his courage to his aid. "Be silent until then, I beg you. We shall be quite alone there, and you may say what you please."

She nodded and rose from the sofa.

Percy staggered rather than walked to a remote corner of the room, where he carried on a mechanical conversation with a couple of the elder guests.

In half an hour he was sitting in the dimly-lighted library where he had so often written Lord Sevenoaks's letters for him. His head was in his hands, and he was thinking intently on his position.

"This woman must be bought off at any price," he said to himself. "I am more than ruined—I am disgraced."

After a period of suspense, which seemed to him to be an hour, though it was in reality only a few minutes, the door opened noiselessly and Lady Scatterton glided in.

"Now," she said, composedly sitting down, "what will you do for me if I hold my tongue, Mr. Fang?"

"For heaven's sake don't call me by that name, or it will slip out when other people are by."

"Oh no," she said, "don't be afraid. I know you are Mr. Fitzclarence now, but I have not come here to bandy words. What will you give me if I keep your secret?"

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Well," she answered, "you have the best reasons for knowing that I am not particularly well off, and that I am always obliged to raise money when and how I can. This is an opportunity I cannot afford to let slip. Give me two thousand pounds and I will not say a word. You shall remain Mr. Fitzclarence for ever."

"You are asking what is impossible, Lady Scatterton. I have not got it."

"You must find it," she replied.

"I cannot possibly raise such a sum. Besides," continued

he, "what guarantee have I that you would not betray me after all?"

"Honour among thieves, you know, Mr. Fitzclarence," sneered Lady Scatterton.

"I am afraid I can scarcely trust that proverb, my lady."

"Very well; give me half now and half when you are married. Then no revelations can be of the slightest consequence to you."

"I cannot even do that, Lady Scatterton," said the miserable Percy. "I really have not got it, and have no means of raising it. The utmost I can do is to give you two hundred pounds now and another thousand a month after I am married to Lady Maud. Will you be satisfied with this?"

"Are you so very poor?" asked Lady Scatterton. "Where has all your father's money gone to?"

"To my elder brother. I have nothing but my horses and a few pounds at the bank. I cannot sell my horses before the Hunt Steeplechase without creating an extraordinary amount of talk. I think I can borrow two hundred pounds—that is the very utmost limit of my tether. Is it settled?"

"Well, I suppose I cannot do better," Lady Scatterton answered, with some hesitation. "It is a bargain. When will you give me the money?"

"To-morrow evening," answered Percy, "you shall have £200, and £1000 a month after I am married."

"You may as well write a promissory note at once for both amounts," said Lady Scatterton.

"Very well," continued Percy, wearily; "but I have no stamps."

"Oh, I have," replied Lady Scatterton. "I always travel with them. One never knows what one may want. But I expected to have to use them myself instead of having to receive them of some one else. Here they are," and she produced the necessary paper which Percy proceeded to fill up.

"'A month after I am married to—to Lady Maud Joscelyn,'" she read out. "That sounds peculiar, but I suppose it is all

right. However, as I don't believe this bill is negotiable, you will have to give me some additional security."

"What can I give you?" asked Percy, his patience almost exhausted.

"Write," she answered. "'I hereby declare that I am the son of James Fang, pawnbroker, of Middlesex Street, Strand, London, and that I am very much obliged to Lady Scatterton or not publishing the above fact.' Now sign that," she added; "and when your second bill is paid you shall have it back."

"No," he answered, jumping up, "Never!" and he tore the paper he had just written into pieces and cast it into the fire. "You have ample security."

"I have not," answered the lady. "I believe that second bill to be absolutely worthless. Well, you had better give it me, for if you don't there will be war between us."

"Then let it be war," answered Percy, hotly, seizing the two bills which were still lying on the table. "Do your worst, Lady Scatterton; I care not. Nothing can be more disgraceful, no fate more terrible, than to be in your power;" and with these words he strode from the room.

XVI.

"My dear Maud," said Lady Scatterton after breakfast the next morning, passing her arm confidentially under the girl's, "let us go into your room and have a nice chat."

Lady Scatterton began the chat with all sorts of indifferent matters, and then suddenly asked Lady Maud whether she knew what Mr. Fitzclarence had been doing before he came to Drayboro.

"Oh yes, dear," replied Lady Maud; "he has told me all about it."

"Indeed!" asked the elder lady, surprised and almost fearing that her vengeance was escaping her, for she was quite determined to serve Percy out for what she called his arrogance of the previous evening. "Do you think he has told you all?"

"I am sure he has," answered Maud, smiling. "His father was a merchant in London, and Percy was in his office for some time, but he did not like it, and when his father died he took the little money that was left him and resolved to go into political life if he found an opportunity."

"Do you know what Mr. Fitzclarence's father's business was?"

"No," answered Lady Maud, looking up rather alarmed at her visitor's tone. "Why should I ask? I don't understand anything about business."

"You would understand this business," said Lady Scatterton. "Mr. Fitzclarence's father was a pawnbroker."

"A pawnbroker!" exclaimed Maud, jumping up in horror. "How can you say such a thing, Lady Scatterton?"

"I am sorry to hurt your feelings, my dear," continued the lady, "but it is just as well you should know all about it before you are married."

"I am sure it is not true," replied the girl, pale as death. "The idea of a Fitzclarence being a pawnbroker."

"He is not a Fitzclarence," continued Lady Scatterton very quietly.

"Not a Fitzclarence!" and now the girl blushed scarlet. "What do you mean? Who is he, then?"

"His name is simply Peter Fang. You see the initials are the same, but it is not quite so pretty as Percy Fitzclarence, is it?"

"Lady Scatterton," said Maud, making an effort to collect herself, "I don't know what your object can be in telling me this wicked falsehood about the gentleman to whom I am engaged."

"My dear Lady Maud," said Lady Scatterton, rather angrily, "it is not a falsehood, and my object is to prevent your making a very unhappy marriage with an unprincipled adventurer."

"It is false," cried Lady Maud, "he is no adventurer. All your accusations are untrue. What proof have you?"

"The very best in the world," answered Lady Scatterton.

"Look at that bracelet you were wearing last night. It was once mine. I was in want of money and I took it to Mr. Fang's shop to pledge it. It is a peculiar jewel, and he declined to advance anything without examining it carefully. He sent his son, who is your Mr. Percy Fitzclarence, to Thomas' Hotel, where I was then stopping, with the twenty pounds which he found he could safely lend me on my bracelet. I have never been able to redeem it, and I suppose when old Fang died he left it to his son with a lot of other unredeemed pledges. That is the history of your Fitzclarence family jewels."

Lady Maud had been listening with dilated eyes. "It is not true," she repeated, "it is too horrible. It cannot be true. You have no other proof than your word. How can I take your word, you wicked woman?"

"My dear, you need not call me names, nor take my word at all. Call Mr. Fitzclarence in and ask him before me."

"How could I so insult him?" cried Lady Maud. "He is the noblest and most generous of men. Why, he would not propose to me, because I was well off. I almost had to ask him myself."

"It only shows what a tremendous humbug he is," answered Lady Scatterton; "he is cleverer than I took him to be. Well, my dear, do as you please, but anyhow I have warned you. Now I am going. I may as well catch the twelve train to town, as I don't suppose you would care about keeping me here. Can you send me to the station?"

Lady Maud made no effort to detain her guest, but rang the bell and ordered the carriage.

Lord Sevenoaks was considerably surprised at Lady Scatterton's abrupt departure, and after much expostulation conducted her to the door where Lady Maud was standing as a matter of form to wish her visitor good bye. She was still extremely pale, but had in the hour which intervened, made up her mind that the whole story was a wicked fabrication of Lady Scatterton's of which the cause might be jealousy or some other inexplicable reason.

Lady Scatterton held out her hand before she stepped into the

carriage. As her father was standing on the steps Maud was obliged to take it.

"Good bye, Maud," said Lady Scatterton. "Oh, by the bye," whispered she, "if you don't believe me, just press the third link of that bracelet. There is a secret spring in it, and you will find some fair hair and my initials, 'L. G. S.,' you know. It is a very peculiar spring. Good bye, dear. I wish you all happiness," she added in a loud voice, and sprang into the carriage.

Lady Maud stared almost wildly after the disappearing conveyance.

"Come in, dear," said Lord Sevenoaks, "it is cold."

She obeyed mechanically, and walked silently to her room, scarcely noticing the many guests who were lounging about the hall and asked her to join in a ride they proposed.

"I cannot believe it," she said to herself pressing her hands to her forehead. "The treachery would be too base. It is impossible. I won't look at the bracelet." Yet while speaking these very words she went to her jewel-case and took it out. With feverish hands she tried the links—one, two, three from the clasp. She pressed it. There was no spring. It did not open. "That wicked woman has lied," exclaimed she to herself with fierce joy. "He is my good, dear, noble Percy." But then it struck her that she had not tried the other end. Again she counted three links and pressed the third. Horror! The back plate of one of the jewels opened and displayed a small curl of fair hair and under it the initials "L. G. S." Maud dropped the bracelet and fainted.

An hour later Percy, as usual, knocked at her sitting-room door. He quite expected that an explosion had taken place, and nerved himself to meet the result. He found her reclining on a sofa, ghastly pale, with the bracelet on a small table by her side. Her eyes looked at him strangely as he entered. He felt at once that she knew all.

"Sit down," she said, when he approached her lovingly as usual. "I have seen Lady Scatterton this morning."

"Indeed," said Percy, not knowing what else to say.

"She has told me many curious things about a Mr. Fang, and she added a story about his son. Are these things true?" and thus speaking she raised her head slowly on her elbow and looked at him steadily.

He could not answer.

"Oh heavens," she said, covering her face with her hands and falling back on the cushions, "they are true! How could you thus deceive me? Go! leave me at once. Don't darken this place any longer, Mr. Fang!

"I am going, Lady Maud," answered Percy, rising not without a certain dignity, "but before I go you must listen to me."

"No, go away," she cried, frantically waving him off with her hands, "don't come near me."

"You *must* hear me," repeated he. "It is a duty I owe to myself. I came here, Lady Maud, without any intention to deceive you. When I left my father's odious business I changed my name. There was no secret about it. In was advertised in all the papers. It could be of no consequence to any one at Drayboro' whether my name was Fang, Smith, or Jones. You know yourself that when I discovered my ill-fated passion for you I tried to go. Your friends stopped me. They forced me into a course which honour ought to have forbidden me to adopt. My only fault was that the temptation of possessing your love proved too great, and I could not bear to risk your loss by telling my origin. I sinned grievously because I loved. All I can now hope for is that you will some day forgive me. I will now relieve you of my presence, which I know must be odious to you." Speaking thus he left the room, and two hours later was installed in his old quarters at the Royal William.

XVII.

It was about five o'clock. The sun streamed brightly into Percy's sitting-room at the Royal William. The afternoon tea

on the table was untouched; for Percy was walking up and down the room, thinking over the day's events.

"If I had not got to ride in that infernal steeple-chase to-morrow," soliloquised he, "I'd make a bolt of it. There's thirty pounds or so owing, and the balance at old Fielding's is not more than fifty, so I can just do it, and get to town without a sixpence. But I don't like to put my backers in a hole, nor myself, for that matter. Let me see." And he took his note and check books out. "I've taken four to one in tenners about Kismet, and then fifty to fifteen. That's all. Just a pony. I might scrape that together at a push; and as to the future, why," sighed he, "the future may take care of itself. I don't care much about it without Maud. But I don't like to sell my backers, and I know young Hargrove, and Biggs, and Fielding, and a lot more, have piled it on Kismet. Confound them! I wish they had left the horse alone. And too late to find a rider, too; because the beggar wants some one that knows him. If I were to get an amateur, it would be worse than scratching him. It's a regular mess."

So saying, he looked sadly at his colours, black and scarlet, which were hanging over the back of a chair, and at all the accoutrements for the morrow's steeplechase. "I never thought I should ride with so poor a heart as this," he said to himself. "But I don't like giving in, though it's not pleasant for me, nor for poor Maud either!" And sitting down, he took a portrait out of his pocket-book, and opened the gold locket he wore on his chain. "Well, darling, I did not mean to harm you," he said, looking lovingly at them. "All my life would have been spent in trying to make yours happy." He pressed his lips to the locket. "I shall have to give it back, I suppose. Good-bye, dearest! Fancy my kissing a bit of cardboard like that!" he suddenly said; "how far gone I must be! I won't lie to myself, but I think, nay, I'm sure, it wasn't the money; and I know it is not the money now. I wish to heaven that she had not a sixpence!"

There was a knock at the door. Percy hastily put the portraits away, and said, "Come in."

"If you please, sir, the gentlemen are waiting," said Charles, handing him two cards.

"All right; show them up. Just what I expected," he thought, and hurriedly poured himself out a cup of tea.

The door was thrown open, and Lord Algernon Joscelyn walked in, followed by Captain Wentworth. The former came striding into the room with a gait and a face betraying intense agitation. The latter looked rather awkward and foolish.

"Now, sir," cried Lord Algernon, almost before the door closed, "I have come to chastise you, and to get my sister's things."

"Sit down, my lord; sit down, Captain Wentworth," said Percy, setting his lips as firmly as he could.

"Sit down! you infernal scoundrel, what do you mean?" almost yelled Lord Algernon. "I have come to horsewhip you; do you hear?" And with these words he shook a cutting-whip threateningly before Percy's face.

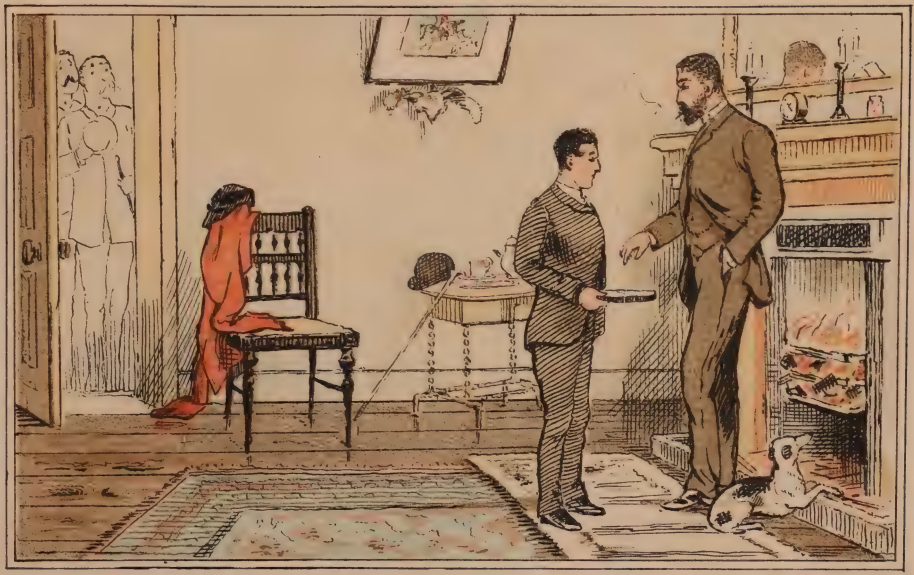
"Are you both going to horse-whip me?" asked Percy, still calm, but repressing his feelings with great difficulty, for Captain Wentworth was also supplied with a similar weapon.

"No, sir," answered the latter. "I have come to see fair play, and to prevent anybody coming in. Perhaps I may have a turn by-and-by." And he put his back against the door, and gazed straight before him.

"Now, look here, Lord Algernon," said Percival, hurriedly, "you are a much smaller man than I am, and you'd better not try to touch me. I give you fair warning. I shall throw you out of the window if you do."

"Coward!" cried Lord Algernon, striking straight at Percy's face with the whip. But the latter had expected the blow. Quick as thought, he had stepped aside, and in another instant he held Lord Percy's right hand tightly in his own, and twisted the whip out of his grasp. He opened the window, and threw the whip into the garden; as he was shutting it down, Lord Algernon flew at him like a tiger, and hit out straight for his face.

"I told you you had better not," remarked Percy, who had for years practised the art of self-defence with great patience



"Please, sir, the gentlemen are waiting."

and perseverance, as he struck the arm up with his right, and with his left gave his lordship a gentle chuck under the chin, which sent him flying against Wentworth.

"Now, my lord," he said, while Lord Algernon was staggering to his feet, "what *is* the use of fighting like a couple of navvies? If you think yourself insulted—and no doubt you have a right to think so—let us go over to Belgium and shoot each other like gentlemen."

"*You* a gentleman," sneered Lord Algernon. "Do you think that I'd go out with a pawnbroker?"

"With the son of a pawnbroker, if you please, my lord. I don't see why you should not. However, you may leave it alone, if you like; I am sure *I* don't want to hurt you. God forbid. Have you got anything else to say? for if not, perhaps this interview may come to an end."

"Yes," growled Wentworth, "I should like to have a turn with you. I'm not a nobleman, and I don't mind shooting a pawnbroker" ("Son, if you please," interrupted Percy) "if he's a brute like you."

"Very well, Captain Wentworth, I am at your service any day after to-morrow. Perhaps you will name a couple of friends to arrange matters. Now is that all?"

"I want my sister's things," said Lord Algernon. "She's written to you three or four times, and I want her letters back, you blackguard. Here are your forfeited pledges."

And he threw down a parcel on the table. No doubt it contained the ill-fated bracelet, and the other little keepsakes from the shop in the Strand.

"And the photographs," continued Captain Wentworth.

"Well, my lord, you are singularly inconsistent. You won't fight me, because I am a pawnbroker's son, but you appeal to the pawnbroker's sense of honour, and want him to give back these very valuable letters, pictures, and jewels. That's scarcely fair."

"We don't appeal to your honour at all," said Wentworth, slapping his chest, in which his pocket-book was concealed.

"We have got plenty of money to buy the things," added

Lord Algernon, who had by this time recovered his calmness somewhat. "We knew that a fellow like you would not give them up for nothing. My father said so."

"Indeed?" asked Percy. "His lordship was quite right. He is a man of the world. And may I ask what Lady Maud said?"

"Hold your tongue, you scoundrel," cried Lord Algernon, "and don't mention her name."

"You've humbugged her completely, you hypocrite," added Wentworth. "She actually said you would not sell them."

A glance of pleasure flashed from Percy's eyes. But it was only a glance. He resumed his impassive attitude. "Ah!" said he, "Lady Maud was wrong. Ladies know nothing of the world. I have got some valuable property, and a poor man like myself (a pawnbroker's son, you know) must make the most of it he can. What are you prepared to give? No cheque, you know! I am too sharp for that. A cheque may be stopped to-morrow, before I can cash it."

"We are prepared for that," answered Lord Algernon. "But our reasons were not yours. *We* don't do that sort of thing. My father simply wanted to save you the disgrace of having to go to Fielding's Bank, and has given us Bank of England notes."

"That was very thoughtful of his lordship," remarked Percy. "Now let me see, what have I got to sell?" He stroked his beard, reflectively. "First of all, there's this locket." And he took it off his chain. "You see, my lord, it's real gold, and it is set with brilliants. Now what do you think that's worth?"

"D—n you," howled Lord Algernon; "how should I know?"

"Ah! no, of course, I forgot. Only a pawnbroker can know the value of that locket. Well, now, my lord, I should call that little thing cheap at five hundred pounds."

"Five hundred!" exclaimed Wentworth, aghast.

"Yes, five hundred; and another hundred for the portrait in it. That's six. Then there are these photographs." And he brought out a packet of them. "You see, there is Lady Maud Joscelyn in all sorts of costumes. There's Lady Maud in her

riding-habit, Lady Maud in evening dress, Lady Maud going for a walk, and so on. Let's see:—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. At a hundred each, is seven hundred pounds."

"You thief," called out Wentworth. "We won't pay it."

"Shut up, Wentworth," said Lord Algernon. "I'd sooner see the estates sold than leave the things in the hands of such a scoundrel. Now for the letters."

"Here they are, my lord," answered Percy, producing a packet. "Would you like to see them? I'll read them to you; this is the first: 'My own dear Percy——'"

"Will you hold your tongue, you infernal rogue," yelled Lord Algernon; "how much do you want for them, and have done with it?"

"Very well, my lord, as you please. There are thirteen letters; at a hundred each, is thirteen hundred pounds. And," he added, reflectively, "I have a few other things. There's a solitaire stud, and a lady's glove, and a ring. Here they are. I'll throw them all in for a mere song. Say three thousand for everything."

"Three thousand pounds!" cried Wentworth, in dismay.

"Well, you see, I've lost my season, so to say. I must get compensation for that. Then there's the horses' keep; it's rather dear at this hotel. And cab-fares to Joscelyn Park, and white kids, and all that. If you consider everything, you'll find I'm cheap—for a pawnbroker, you know."

"Well, you are the very biggest thief and rogue I ever even heard of," said Lord Algernon, almost laughing, notwithstanding his violent anger. "But, fortunately, we have just got about enough."

"Ah! I thought that was about what the Earl of Sevenoaks would run to," remarked Percy, as if to himself.

Percy then carefully packed all the letters, pictures, and trifles for which he had secured so good a sale, and placed them before Lord Algernon on the table. "Now for the money, if you please," said he.

Captain Wentworth produced a fat pocket-book. He counted

out twenty-nine hundred-pound notes, and smaller ones to the extent of another hundred, making three little heaps of a thousand pounds each. Percy carefully counted them after him. "That is right, my lord," he said to Algernon. "Thank you; and please to thank the Earl from me. Not such a *very* bad winter's work. But I'm afraid it will rather spoil my business."

"That it will, you blackguard, if *we* can stop you," answered Lord Algernon. "Now let's get out of this robber's den, Wentworth."

"Wait a minute, my lord, and Captain Wentworth, if you please. There is another little matter I want you to see about. You ought to know that you have had value for your money, and what sort of a fellow a pawnbroker is. Now," he continued, rapidly twisting up in his fingers one of the thousand pound packets of notes. "I am very hard up, I confess it. I shall have scarcely a penny left when I have paid outstanding accounts. But, you know, I've made a good haul to-day, and I can afford a little smoke."

So saying, he put a cigarette in his mouth, and lighted the roll of notes at the fire.

"Will you take a cigarette, my lord?" he asked, puffing gently, and holding the expensive "spill" for Lord Algernon to light from. "No? Very well, then;" and he threw the remains of a thousand pounds into the fire.

They were both too astonished to speak. They stared blankly. "Give me another minute," added Percy.

"Don't burn any more money," faintly gasped Wentworth.

"I won't," answered he, "it would be extravagant."

He rapidly directed a couple of large envelopes, which he took from a side table, folded up each of the packets of notes in a blank sheet of paper, and put a thousand pounds into each envelope. Then, having sealed them, he carefully fixed three stamps to each, and held them out to Lord Algernon, who was still staring.

"Would you mind getting these two letters posted for me?" he asked. "And registered? They contain money."

Algernon could not help reading the bold hand of the addresses. One was directed to—

"The Treasurer,
"Asylum for Idiots,
"Earlswood,
"Surrey."

The other to—

"The Secretary,
"Hospital for Sick Children,
"Ormond Square, London. W.C."

Lord Algernon took them almost mechanically.

"You see," added Percy, "they are anonymous, and won't come back again. And I am anxious to support institutions of this description. They are useful. There are more idiots and babies in the world than I thought," glancing at the two; "but there is only one Lady Maud. Perhaps you will give the Earl and her my compliments."

With these words he held the door open. They were about to pass out silently, when he stopped them again.

"One word more, Lord Algernon. The Hunt Steeplechases take place to-morrow in your park?"

Algernon bowed.

"I should gladly not go, and scratch the horse I have entered. But I understand Kismet has been heavily backed by my friends, and I cannot find a rider who understands him between this and to-morrow. I must therefore ride him myself. Will you please understand that this is the only reason why I am compelled to force myself into Joscelyn Park? I shall leave Drayboro' the next day."

"Very well," said Lord Algernon, recovering himself with an effort. "You can't help it, I see. Good afternoon."

And he bowed stiffly, and walked downstairs.

Captain Wentworth turned round at the door.

"Mr. Fitzclarence, I withdraw all I said, and apologise.

You are a gentleman. Will you shake hands?" And the honest fellow held out his muscular right hand, which Percy shook with a will. Then Wentworth followed his cousin.

"What shall we do with this money?" asked Lord Algernon of Captain Wentworth as he took the reins to drive home.

"Send it to the hospitals as he directed," answered Wentworth.

"Perhaps we had better do so. I do not know that we have got out of this matter so well as we ought," he added, thoughtfully. "I rather think that beast was laughing at us half the time."

"Not the slightest doubt of it," remarked Wentworth, chewing his moustache.

"On the whole he behaved very well to-day, and gave me an infernal hiding. But nothing can ever justify the lies he told about his family," said Lord Algernon, flicking his whip viciously. "He is a humbug and an impostor, and whatever he does now cannot alter the fact that he has been sailing under false pretences all this time."

Wentworth was silent, nor did they exchange many words before arriving at the Hall.

XVIII.

"LADY MAUD is waiting for your lordship in her boudoir," said the old butler, as he helped Lord Algernon off with his great coat; and in obedience to the summons the latter walked up with his parcel under his arm; but as slowly as he could.

"Here are your things, Maud," said he, putting them on the table.

"What did he say?—what did he do?" asked Lady Maud, eagerly. "Did he take the money?"

"He took it."

She hid her face in her hands. Her head fell back on the pillow of the sofa. She was silent for a few moments.

"Thank you, Algernon," she at length said in a very low voice, the tears coursing slowly down her pale cheeks. And she looked at her brother with weary eyes as if the world could give her nothing more to hope for. "Thank you, Algernon," she repeated. "I would rather be alone now."

"Well," stammered Lord Algernon, "he took the money as I said, but—he—he didn't keep it."

"What do you mean?" asked Lady Maud, again sitting up

and her face flushing. "You say he took the money and then you say he did not. What am I to understand? Is he a mere fortune-hunter, a low, deceitful scoundrel as you say, or is he only an unfortunate man, who, having told one untruth is ashamed to confess it, and is obliged to tell a number more to cover it? Now do speak and put me out of my misery."

"You don't mean to say you care about that pawnbroker still?" asked Algernon.

"Oh, Algy, dear," replied his sister, gently leaning her fair head on her hand and looking at her brother with tearful eyes, "if you had ever loved anyone in your life you would not ask me such a question. But I see I shall have to get Captain Wentworth to give me an intelligible account of all that has passed."

Wentworth was at once summoned, although the dinner-hour was nigh, and Lord Sevenoaks did not like to be kept waiting. The gallant captain's account of the interview was to the point and quite comprehensible. He was not a man of imagination, and therefore he added nothing to bare facts. Whatever he forgot was elicited by Lady Maud's cross-examination. Wentworth concluded the account by saying, "That fellow has cut me out, and he had no business to brag of his family. He was an infernal fool for doing so, but all of us brag sometimes. I remember I have told lots of lies about my horses in my time, and I will say that for the fellow, he made me thoroughly ashamed of myself for offering him the money."

The second dinner-bell rang, and they had to leave Lady Maud hurriedly and appear at dinner in morning dress, a departure from the usual custom which Lord Sevenoaks perceived, but under the circumstances was willing to excuse. He had not heard the result of the interview, and could not ask in the presence of the servants. Scarcely was the wine on the table and the door closed when Lord Algernon handed over to him the two envelopes, saying:

"Here is £2000 back, father; the beggar burnt the other thou."

Questions of course followed, and there was a fresh explanation of the extraordinary events of the afternoon. Lord Sevenoaks was much disturbed. It was not the loss of his thousand that grieved him, for he had been ready to sacrifice much more. It was the effect which Percy's generosity was likely to have upon his daughter.

She meanwhile was sitting in her room pretending to read, but pondering over the extraordinary inconsistencies in Percy's conduct. No man could have been more generous, kinder, nor more unselfish than Percy during the time he had spent at the Hall, and to these qualities, which endeared him to the whole family, and even to the servants, he added a very high degree of culture, a gift of quick repartee, good conversational powers, and last but not least in Lady Maud's eyes, an excellent seat and good hands in the hunting field. Yet all this time he had been pretending to be what he was not—a man of ancient lineage and good connections. He had been brought up in the atmosphere of a London back slum, not in the pure air of a refined country home. He was the son of a pawnbroker, not a man whose ancestors had come over with the Conqueror. As to his means, Lady Maud attached very little weight to any exaggeration in this matter, but she could not have forgiven his deception if it had not been partly redeemed in her eyes by his behaviour of that afternoon. She had not yet quite decided whether it was *entirely* redeemed or not; and while the discussion was going on down-stairs, one quite as lively, though less loud, was taking place within her own bosom.

"Strange creature!" she thought; "can it be that race and lineage and breeding have nothing to do with noble sentiments? There is not one of those descendants of old families that I know who would have had the heart to do what he has done, nor the cleverness to do it so well. He has completely put us all to shame. Why even Algy would, I know, have thought a long time before he would have thrown away a thousand pounds just to show that he had a soul above money. And yet this man, they say, has not got sixpence. Poor fellow!"

"Are you going to run your mare to-morrow?" asked Lord Sevenoaks of his son, when they had talked for more than an hour about Percy.

"Of course, father. Have you any objection?"

"None whatever, my boy," answered Lord Sevenoaks. "And is that fellow going to run his horses?"

"I believe so," replied Lord Algernon. "He said he could not scratch Kismet on account of his backers."

"Is he going to ride himself?" inquired the old gentleman again.

"Yes," answered Captain Wentworth.

Then Lord Sevenoaks said, turning to his son, "Take care he does not give you as good a licking to-morrow as he did to-day."

"I don't think he will," answered Lord Algernon. "Wild Cat will beat his horse any day. I must go and look after her now," he added, rising from the table.

"Well, I hope to goodness she *will* beat him," said Lord Sevenoaks, looking rather distressed and not too sure of the result. "I don't want him to score again. Good-night, Algy, and good luck to you. Let me know early in the morning whether the mare is all right."

XIX.

THE South Loamshire Steeplechase. The course a fair four miles of hunting country, beginning and finishing in Joscelyn Park, where there was a straight run in of more than a quarter of a mile. At two places, in and out, the wooden park railings were removed for the purpose of making fairly negotiable jumps. On one side, nearest the Hall, was a small temporary stand; next to it, fifty yards away, the judge's box; between the two, a little behind, a tent for the clerk of the scales, and a dressing-tent and refreshment-tent for the members. Sundry other temporary structures were permitted by the kindness of Lord Sevenoaks to be erected on each side of the course, such permission being,

however, limited as much as possible to Drayboro' people and his own tenants. There was a crowd of carriages, dog-carts, tilburys, and nondescript vehicles of every sort, and another of spectators on foot, who were at first scattered all over the park, but who gradually formed a dense throng on each side of the ropes which marked out the course. The South Loamshire whips assisted the local police in keeping the good-natured country folk back. Nor was their task a difficult one. There was, of course, the betting-ring, which is inseparable from every meeting nowadays, and what with the sporting tendencies of the farmers, the presence of a good many officers from the neighbouring garrison town, and the special fancies of the gentlemen themselves and of their sons, there was a good deal of speculation. There were four races set for the day; the first a farmer's race over the steeplechase course, the second a flat race, the third *the* event of the day, "The Great South Loamshire Hunt Steeplechase," with £100 added, and finally, a selling hurdle race. All of these, excepting the flat race, were strictly confined to horses that had been regularly hunted with the South Loamshire hounds. Nor was Mr. Slogum at all lavish in giving certificates. It was not enough for him that a thoroughbred fresh from a racing-stable should be bucketed about at the meet once or twice. Unless the animal had been regularly ridden to his hounds, and unless he had himself seen him so ridden on more than one occasion, nothing would induce the Master to grant the much desired piece of paper. On one occasion an enterprising trainer on a small scale had threatened him with the penalties of the law for refusing a race-horse whom he had ridden round Mr. Slogum's hounds on two successive Wednesdays, a certificate as a qualified hunter. But Mr. Slogum replied that he was at liberty to go to law, but that meanwhile he had better not show his d—— ugly face with the South Loamshire hounds again, or he would be sorry for it. The worthy thought better of it, and did not appeal to a court of justice. The result was that nothing but real genuine hunters were entered for these three races. The farmers' contest,

although a very good one, did not attract a fraction of the interest commanded by the great event of the day. For this there were nine entries, and six appeared at the post. Before the numbers went up (chalked on boards painted black, and run up by a string to the top of a pole for the edification of the spectators, who had some trouble in making them out, as they were always swaying about in the wind) there was some whispering and speculation in certain remote corners of the ring and grand stand as to whether either of Mr. Percy Fitzclarence's two entries would appear at the post. It had been known that Kismet had been regularly trained for the race, and Fortune, too, was entered. Up to the previous morning Kismet had commanded a good deal of support, as Percy made no secret that he was the better of the two, and everybody had seen him out with the South Loamshire. But, during the afternoon, certain ugly rumours had got afloat which indicated something wrong, not perhaps with the horse, but with the owner. It was said that Mr. Fitzclarence was about to leave Drayboro'. It was whispered that a sudden rupture had taken place between himself and his noble *fiancée*. It was hinted that he was connected with some gigantic frauds, and people shook their heads mysteriously. It need scarcely be observed that these reports had been cleverly sown by Lady Scatterton. Round Lord Sevenoaks' barouche, which was, as usual, drawn up close to the rails and just by the grand stand, no such rumours were of course heard, although perhaps inquiries addressed to Lady Maud and Lord Sevenoaks himself as to the whereabouts of Mr. Fitzclarence were more numerous than they would have been had the ugly reports not been current. For Lord Sevenoaks and his daughter determined to appear at the races as usual. They had done so from time immemorial. One of the earliest treats which Lady Maud could remember was being taken by her father and mother to witness the Hunt Steeplechases. Not a single year had hitherto been omitted, except when the great black hatchment was hung over the porch of Joscelyn Hall the year that Lady Sevenoaks was buried.

There had been no difference of opinion between father and daughter on this matter. Lord Sevenoaks assumed that Mr. Fitzclarence would disappear on the next day, but he admitted that he was right to remain and run his horse in the steeple-chase. His lordship thought it would be best for them all to go up to town as usual immediately after the event, and to travel for a few months when the season was over. The rupture of the engagement would meanwhile become known, but six months would elapse before the return of the family to Joscelyn Hall, so that the wonder would meanwhile have died a natural death. This was Lord Sevenoaks' plan, and he therefore appeared as usual in the comfortable old family barouche by his daughter's side. She was very pale, and appeared *distraite*. Every now and then those who hung about the carriage noticed that she seemed to sink into a reverie, but then again, making an effort, she looked as lively and amiable as usual. Her eyes, however, often wandered to the three little tents on the other side of the grand stand. She saw in the crowd a very great number of faces she knew well, not, however, the one face she desired to see more than any other.

"Six to four against Wild Cat; three to one against Kismet; four to one on the field; I'll bet against Rufus;"—such and similar exclamations penetrated even as far as Lord Sevenoaks' carriage when the whisper went round that Mr. Fitzclarence had arrived, and that his horses would certainly start. Kismet, who had been languidly supported at fours and fives in the morning, rose at once to the position of second favourite, Lord Algernon Joscelyn's Wild Cat occupying that of first, almost as much on account of her owner's brilliant victory in the same race the year before as on account of the intrinsic merits of the mare. Rufus and Snowstorm, the former belonging to Captain Darcy of the 94th Lancers, and the latter to a friend and neighbour of Lord Sevenoaks, were next in demand, though Mr. Biggs junior's little mare, who had given him the bath in the brook which has already been mentioned, was not without a stray supporter. Kismet was mounted by her owner, so also Rufus, Wild Cat, and

the little thoroughbred, Sorceress, for Mr. Biggs, junior, had a great idea of himself as a steeplechase rider. A Mr. Wise, a London man, who was stopping at the Royal William, made up the field with a fine weight-carrier called Banker. This horse and Snowstorm were both to be ridden by South Loamshire amateurs. The weight was 12st. 7lbs., and Lord Algernon had to select the heaviest saddle in his place to pull it, besides taking four pounds of lead with him. Percy just about managed it in his usual hunting equipment, the heaviest of the sextett being Captain Darcy, whose saddle was not quite a comfortable one for a four-mile steeplechase. Percy's colours were black and scarlet, his second horse, Fortune, which was also started to make the running, and ridden by Mr. Lambert, junior, being distinguished by a white scarf. Lord Algernon was all blue, Captain Darcy pink and white, Mr. Wise harlequin, and Mr. Biggs green, with white sleeves and cap. The start was from the park palings just inside the last jump but one. They had to take their first hurdle almost opposite the stand, then to jump out of the park across the road, and, turning to the right, to traverse a couple of ploughs with ordinary fences and a stubble field; thence, again bearing to the right down a meadow, they would jump the brook for the first time. From here the course was nearly straight for a mile and a half over various not very formidable obstacles. After this, turning to the right again, the brook was crossed for the second time, both water jumps being within half a mile in a straight line of the grand stand. After the second brook jump came a double, and then only a small fence until the park palings were again reached, the finish being on the inside of the first hurdle, which had therefore not to be jumped again.

"Three to one against Kismet!" was still shouted in the ring when Percy walked into the noisy crowd, his colours concealed by a long ulster.

"I will take it in tenners," said he. His appearance, composed, though pale, and the business-like look on his face as he pulled out his betting-book, soon sent Kismet half a point up.

"I want to back my horse against the favourite, one to win,"

said he to Mr. Lambert, who was on these occasions eminently the sporting publican.

"Sorry we cannot accommodate you, sir," answered a professional bookmaker. "We will lay the odds against your horse, but we won't back any other to win against him."

"No, we should never get round that way," remarked another.

Captain Wentworth overheard this conversation, and whispered to Lord Algernon.

The latter nodded.

"Mr. Fitzclarence," said the gallant Captain, coming forward, "I heard you saying that you wished to back your horse against Wild Cat. I will lay you the market odds. They are about six to four."

"No," said Percy; "it is not enough. I want seven to four."

"Wait a minute then." Captain Wentworth went back to Lord Algernon, and a whispered consultation again took place.

"Very well," said he to Percy. "I will lay you seven to four in ponies."

"Done!" said Percy, noting it down.

"Again?" asked Wentworth.

"Yes, again," said Percy.

"Hundreds, if you like," remarked Wentworth.

"Very well, hundreds—so be it," replied Percy with composure.

Even Lord Algernon was a little shaken by the coolness with which this man, who, as they knew, had scarcely a penny in the world, took a bet of £700 to £400.

"I hope he will pay," said Lord Algernon under his voice.

"Oh yes, my lord," said Percy in a clear, shrill tone, overhearing the remark. "I shall pay if I lose. You know there are those valuable family jewels," and he nodded and sauntered out of the ring, refusing any further offers against Kismet, for, said he, his book was full. As he went to have a last look at the horse before the bell rang, he said to himself, "It is all very well putting a bold face on it, but where I am to get the five hundred if I lose this race, I don't know any better than they do.

If I sold all the horses on the spot, I should scarcely be able to raise it. But I *must* not lose. I wonder if Charles has brought me that cup of cold tea."

And so saying, he went into the dressing tent, where the bell rang as he sipped his non-intoxicating stimulant.

It took less time than might have been expected to get the horses ready. In ten minutes they had filed out to take their preliminary canters. The most admired was undoubtedly the heavy weight carrier, whose magnificent bone and muscle could not fail to strike a superficial beholder. Next for good looks stood the favourite, a wiry, lengthy, low mare, whose jumping powers were well known in the Hunt, and whose breeding looked more unexceptionable than the Stud Book testified. Rufus, too, looked well. He was a bright chestnut with white stockings, but his temper was scarcely what could be desired, and he lashed out viciously in his canter. Mr. Biggs's Sorceress, though a nice little mare, was decidedly undersized. Nor did her rider appear to have that control over her which is absolutely necessary to win a steeplechase. Fortune and Kismet strode down side by side with as much calmness as if they were merely cantering along the road on their way to a meet. They were soon assembled at the post, and as the flag fell, the black and white belt of Fortune was at once seen in the van. Following orders, she raced from the start and took the first hurdle in her stride. As they passed the stand she was leading by about six lengths. Next came Sorceress, whom Mr. Biggs could scarcely control, then Snowstorm and Rufus something like three lengths in the rear, Wild Cat and Banker close together, and Kismet the last of all, wide on the right. This, we need hardly say, was the inside all the way. They jumped out of the Park into the road without an accident, Fortune a long way ahead. As soon as they had disappeared there was a general rush of spectators to the water-jump, and Lord Sevenoaks' barouche, as his lordship was on his own property, was driven across the course, and took up its station where a good view could be obtained from the box.

"You had better not get up, dear," said his lordship to Maud.

"Oh yes, papa; why not?" answered she, scrambling up to the box seat. "I am quite quiet;" but as she said so, her trembling hand, which could scarcely hold the field-glass, betrayed that her calmness was only assumed.

Captain Wentworth joined them on his cob. "Algy will lose a lot if he does not beat Kismet," said he to Lord Sevenoaks. "He has backed Wild Cat for seven hundred."

"Well, he can afford to lose," answered his lordship. "I don't mind his backing his horse to win; but I am afraid of his losing his head in the race. But here they come."

The caps of the riders were visible over the distant hedge. They seemed to be moving quite slowly from this vantage point. The scarlet one was still in front, and the blue one not far behind. Another scarlet one was some distance in the rear, but nearest the spectators. Fortune came into view as she landed well through a thick blackthorn hedge. Then followed Rufus. Lord Algernon came over next, holding his mare hard. Snowstorm was fourth, and then after a few seconds interval appeared Kismet, sailing along apparently very pleasantly, though the tight rein betrayed that he was hard held. Last of all was Banker, evidently out-paced; but Sorceress was nowhere to be seen.

"They say Biggs's little mare has run out," said Wentworth, as the party galloped down to the posts and rails, the jump which preceded the brook. There Mr. Lambert, junr., took a pull at Fortune, who touched the top rail and got over safely. Rufus went at it a little too fast, and a complete somersault was the result. Both horse and rider, however, seemed unhurt, as Darcy was in the saddle again almost as soon as Snowstorm had cleared it. Kismet then followed, still inside, cantering up to the obstacle very quietly. He took it in very collected form. Then Percy was seen to sit down and relax his reins a moment to give his horse his head at the big water-jump which was now to follow. Fortune was still leading, though only by about a length; Wild Cat next, Lord Algernon sitting well down, holding the mare's head straight, his knees well into her sides, and his

head slightly forward. Captain Darcy also meant business, and there was no sign of any wavering. Fortune and Wild Cat cleared the brook handsomely almost abreast. Rufus followed, also jumping clean; and Kismet, who had by this time collared Snowstorm, landed well on the opposite bank, but Snowstorm jumped a little short, and fell back into the water; while Banker's rider pulled his horse up, finding that his chance was hopeless, and not caring about risking a ducking. There was at once a rush to assist Snowstorm and his rider, and while the struggle was going on, young Biggs suddenly appeared, galloping hard to make up for lost time, and shouting loud to the people to get out of his way. The little mare had evidently almost had enough of it, but she went at the brook gallantly, and landed well on the far side, amidst the cheers of the crowd. Banker's rider, seeing that there was another horse still further behind than himself, made up his mind to try again, and this perfect hunter had no hesitation in facing the water and galloping on in pursuit of the rest. A rapid move was now made for the second water jump, but Lord Sevenoaks, helping his daughter down, remarked that by going there they might lose the finish. With a good many others, therefore, they returned to the grand stand.

Meanwhile Fortune had been gradually resigning her lead to Wild Cat. Lord Algernon frequently looked over his shoulder to see what black and scarlet was doing. He was getting nervous, and though he felt sure he could beat Rufus in a straight run in, he did not like Kismet remaining behind. Snowstorm he was not much afraid of after the accident at the brook. His principal anxiety was therefore Kismet. So far all was well. Wild Cat still seemed as fresh as paint, and had taken all her jumps handsomely. She was yet pulling, and far more than half the course had been accomplished. The only big jump to meet was the second brook, for the double was one which the little mare was thoroughly well used to, and where a tired horse is less likely to make a mistake than a fresh one. The difficulty is to get them to take it slowly enough. Still Algy did not like leading. Though not a very good hand at estimating pace, he

felt sure they had been going quite fast enough, and when Fortune, before reaching the second brook, gradually dropped behind, he also took a pull at Wild Cat, and resolved to keep something to spare for the finish. Nothing serious happened until the water was reached a second time. They maintained the same order, and went at it with scarcely a change ; Wild Cat first, Rufus next, Snowstorm and Kismet almost together, Fortune being stopped entirely before they came to it. Percy hustled Kismet a little in order to face the water before Snowstorm, who, he felt instinctively, would again jump short. He reached the bank, still on the inside, just as Rufus landed safely, and sailed up the pastures beyond. It was well he had got out of Snowstorm's way, for a splash behind him as he cleared the water and took a pull at his horse, told him that another adversary was disabled. There were now really only three in the race, for Sorceress, eight lengths in the rear, was quite beaten, and only jumped into the water to keep Snowstorm company, while Banker was evidently not accustomed to steeple-chase pace, and though he took all the jumps cleverly and well, was outpaced as soon as they came to grass. Percy anxiously watched the two in front of him. Rufus gradually drew up to Wild Cat, and it was evident that Lord Algernon was saving his mare. "If he saves her too long," thought Percy, "he will beat me in the run in," and he resolved that he would let his horse out as soon as they had cleared the double. There Rufus was almost down on his head, but recovered himself, and still went on in front, Wild Cat on his left, and Kismet gradually drawing up on the inside. The three took the last jump but one almost abreast. They had then only the park to jump into, and Percy could see the heads of the dense crowd, and the figures standing on the tops of the coaches and on the seats of the dog-carts. "Now for it," thought he, as he at last let Kismet go as hard as he liked : "I think we can take this jump at a fly." Nor was he wrong, for there was still plenty to spare when he felt the elastic turf of the park under his horse's feet. Rufus had come down beaten, but even yet his plucky rider scrambled into the saddle as Percy ranged up

alongside Wild Cat for the final effort. They raced in neck and neck, the mare still having slightly the best of it. But when it came to getting the last ounce out of his horse, Lord Algernon's hasty temper was no match for our hero's calmness. Foot by foot Percy wore down his adversary's lead without raising his whip, while Algernon was severely punishing his mare. Opposite the grand stand he gave Kismet one kick with his spur, and sent him home a winner by a length. The occupants of the carriages could not be sure of the result until the numbers went up. Opposite them, blue seemed to have had the best of it.

"Algernon has won, papa?" said Lady Maud in a faint voice, for she was unable to see through her glass any longer, and had stepped back into the carriage.

"I think so, my dear," answered Lord Sevenoaks, eagerly waiting for the numbers. "No, confound it, number three. That's that beast Fang. I beg your pardon," he added, turning to his daughter, "I could not help it."

Lady Maud gave him a reproachful yet happy look.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the crowd. Lord Sevenoaks stepped down and into the weighing enclosure to see what was the matter. He had some difficulty in forcing his way through the people. At last he perceived a form clad in black and scarlet half on the ground and half supported by a couple of countrymen.

"What is the matter?" asked he.

"It is not my fault," said Lord Algernon, wiping his forehead. "The mare kicked him."

"Kicked who?" asked Lord Sevenoaks.

"Why, Mr. Fitzclarence," said Lord Algernon. "She let out at him as he was coming out of the weighing tent. Is there not a doctor here?"

Of course there was. Dr Biggs had been waiting impatiently for a chance of chaffing his son, in whose success he had never had any great confidence. He at once elbowed his way through the crowd and examined the wounded man, whose head was hanging over the arm of Mr. Fielding, while his right boot was stained with crimson.

"Make room here, make room!" cried the doctor. "Carry him into one of these tents, and you fellows stand back." The crowd gave way, and a clear space was formed, thanks to the endeavours of Lord Sevenoaks, his son, and Mr. Slogum's staff.

"He weighed in all right," said the clerk of the scales, as he made room for the patient. "It was just as he was stepping out again that the mare let fly with both heels."

There was a confused murmur of voices and a prolonged pause of expectation. It was some time before the doctor came out. "I cannot quite tell what is the matter yet," said he to Lord Sevenoaks, "but he is very much hurt. Is there not a place handy where we can take him to?"

"Why, yes," replied Lord Sevenoaks, "there is his own cottage. He only cleared out yesterday, so it is all quite comfortable."

"Very well," replied Biggs, and he selected four of the strongest men to carry a litter improvised of carriage cushions and rugs. "Now let everybody make room."

XX.

THE wound was serious. There was a compound fracture of the right leg and a severe bruise of the left thigh. Both heels of the mare had fairly landed. There could be no thought of moving him for some days, possibly even weeks. The position meanwhile was most difficult for Lord Sevenoaks and his family. The man, they felt, was an impostor. That fact could not be got over, yet except for his humbug about his family, he had behaved himself gallantly all through and as a gentleman should, and finally he had been wounded by Lord Algernon Joscelyn's own mare, whom he had defeated after a hard struggle by sheer coolness and horsemanship. For a few days Lord Sevenoaks and his son avoided speaking either to each other or to Lady Maud on the subject of the accident. But on the Wednesday following the race, Lord Sevenoaks called his daughter into the library after breakfast, and asked her when she would be ready to go to town.

To town?" asked she.

"Yes, my dear. We were to have gone yesterday, you know, but this unfortunate accident has made me put our start off for a day or two. However, now Mr. Fitzclarence is in a fair way to recover and in good hands, I suppose we may as well go up to Grosvenor Place the day after to-morrow."

"Papa," answered Lady Maud, with a rapid blush mounting to her pale cheeks, "are you going to leave Mr. Fitzclarence here like that?"

"Why, my dear; what else can I do?" asked he, in reply.

"I cannot go away," she answered.

"You are surely not going to stop here by yourself, Maud."

"No, papa; of course if you insist upon it I must go. He—" and she stopped.

"He—what, my dear? You are surely not thinking of Mr. Fitzclarence still."

She put her arms round his neck and hid her face on his shoulder.

"Well, dear," continued the old gentleman, stroking her fair hair tenderly, "what is it? Tell me. You need not be afraid."

She did not reply, but her bosom heaved and quick sobs followed each other.

"What is it, darling?" continued Lord Sevenoaks. "You know I will do anything in the world for you."

"Papa," she at length said, lifting her tearful eyes imploringly to his face, "I can think of nothing but Mr. Fitzclarence."

"Do you mean to say that you still wish to marry him?" asked the old lord, taking her hands and holding her at arm's length. "A Joscelyn to marry a Fang!"

"Oh! papa," she cried, "don't use that horrid name. You know he himself was ashamed of it, and that is the reason he took another."

"But, my dear," almost smiling at her feminine logic, "he has grossly deceived you and all of us."

"Only in one little thing," said she. "I believe it was thoughtlessness rather than anything else which made him talk

of his family, and when he had once begun he could not get out of it. But whatever it is, papa dear, I have forgiven him. Cannot you do the same?" And then she again embraced Lord Sevenoaks, and put her face confidingly against his. "You know he is noble, brave, and kind, dear papa," said she, "and if I must not marry him it will break both our hearts."

"Pooh!" sneered Lord Sevenoaks. "I will answer for his."

"Well, then it will break mine," continued Lady Maud. "Of course if you say it must not be, it shall not be. I will not disobey you."

Lord Sevenoaks did not at once give way. He persisted in going to town, and Lady Maud, as an obedient daughter, of course went with him. But though she put on no airs of a victim, though she endeavoured to do her duty as cheerfully as possible, neither her father nor her brother could fail to perceive a complete change in her. She hardly ever spoke unless spoken to. She avoided dancing as much as possible, and when taken to balls went home almost as soon as she got there on the plea of a headache. She was ready to read to her father, to ride with him, and in fact to do everything as she had hitherto done. But everything was done listlessly, and at the cost of great self-control. In the morning her eyes were frequently red, and her cheeks had lost their former roses. If under any possible circumstances Lady Maud could have looked ugly she would now have looked so; and even her London acquaintances could not fail to notice that Lady Maud Joscelyn was not half so brilliant nor attractive this season as last. News was sent of Fitzclarence officially to Lord Sevenoaks, but he did not even allude to Dr. Biggs's letters. Lady Maud, therefore, very soon opened a correspondence with that worthy man on her own account, and one evening the party in Grosvenor Place was rather surprised at Dr. Biggs's arrival, of which his lordship was informed when he returned from the House.

"Where is he?" asked Lord Sevenoaks.

"He is with Lady Maud," replied the butler. "Dr. Biggs has been in her ladyship's room ever since he came."

What was said in that boudoir, what arguments Lady Maud used, and what were Dr. Biggs's replies, it boots not to tell. Suffice it to say that after dinner the doctor had a lengthy confidential interview with Lord Sevenoaks, and that his Lordship next morning at breakfast asked Lady Maud whether she was inclined to run down to Joscelyn Hall on that afternoon.

Maud flushed scarlet, and declared that she would be ready.

"I suppose you won't come, Algy," said he, turning to his son.

"No, thank you, Papa," replied the latter, "I prefer town just now."

"Very well, my boy," replied his father; "then we will have it all to ourselves. Perhaps an old friend of ours may join us by-and-by."

By-and-by—that was in about another month—when Percy could be wheeled in an invalid chair to Joscelyn Hall, it was rumoured in Drayboro' that the whole affair before the steeplechase had been a misunderstanding, that Lord Sevenoaks had never broken the match off, but that in consequence of the accident the marriage had been somewhat delayed.

"My darling," said Percy to Maud, as they stood together on the terrace of Joscelyn Hall, he still leaning on a crutch, she tenderly supporting him on the other side. "I am going to make you a confession."

"What is it, dear?" she asked, playfully.

"It is a serious confession, Maud," answered Percy. "I came down to Drayboro' to find an heiress. Your brother was quite right, I was a fortune-hunter."

"What do you mean?" asked she, clinging to him and looking into his face, which was lighted by the pale rays of a midsummer moon.

"Dearest," he went on, "I knew of you and your money before I came down. I heard you were beautiful, and I determined, if I could, to win your heart. I lost my own before I was aware of it, and I then bitterly reproached myself for having sought your fortune, and now, Maud—now that you know all,

you can still be free before it is too late, and can marry some one who has got more money, and does not want yours."

"How can I?" she asked, pressing his arm tenderly.

"I cannot give you up and live," replied he; "or rather, for it is cowardly to talk of suicide, if I had to give you up I would emigrate to some wild country, where the cares of a daily existence would be so rough and so oppressive as to trample every spark of sentiment out of my heart."

"But why talk of going and leaving me?" asked Maud, hastily.

"Because, my darling, I am not worthy of you," replied Percy. "I have confessed to you that I came to Drayboro' with the intention of marrying a woman of whom I only knew that she had money and was beautiful. I came and found her beautiful and forgot her money, but the plan remained. I carried it out because I loved her, not because I loved her money-bags. Still I am morally guilty."

"And who is not morally guilty in this world?" asked Maud, gently stroking her lover's shoulder. "Has no one, do you think, ever had evil thoughts or plans except yourself? No, Percy, I am not going to give you up and give up all my happiness because you were once poor and wretched, and would have married anybody fairly good-looking for the sake of her money. You have won the heiress, and you must keep her. Will you?"

Need we say what the reply was? It remains only to add that just one year after that November when Percy had exulted in his freedom, he returned to town exulting in his new fetters. By his side was Lady Maud, now Lady Maud Fitzclarence. Her colour had returned, her face was beaming with happiness, and as far as our information reaches, she has never regretted marrying the adventurer.

A RACE, A BALL, AND A DUEL.

CHAPTER I.

A RACE.

SOME time ago I was sent to Hungary for the purpose of buying two very dissimilar articles—timber and horses. My stay in that country was rather prolonged, and business led me to remain for more than a year in one district, where I was, of course, soon perfectly at home among the hospitable Hungarian "magnates," and was made free of their houses, their clubs, and their stables. I had established my quarters in the suburbs of the town of M——, where some extensive sheds, which I had patched up and made fairly weather-tight *ad hoc*, received the horses I bought until a transport could be got ready to send away. My stud was extensive in quantity rather than quality through constantly changing, and I was always either in the saddle or driving a team of four over the atrocious country roads, to examine some distant forests, or to hunt up some good thoroughbred of which I had

heard. My pursuits naturally brought me into frequent contact with the regiment of hussars quartered in M——, and my chief friends were among the officers of this regiment. A certain Count B——, a very good fellow, standing about five foot seven, a bold rider and a capital shot, was my great ally, and through him I had many a good chase after the wild boar and the bear which frequented the mountains. B—— was the chief authority in the regiment on racing matters, and, with the assistance of some of the local magnates, succeeded in getting up a race meeting at the quiet town of M——.

As the season was far advanced (it was the middle of November), the principal attraction of the meeting consisted of steeplechases and hurdle races, mostly confined to officers of the regiment, to chargers and troopers. Two races, however, were open to the world, and in both I entered a pick of my crocks. I had in my stable a beautiful little mare I had called Reinette, and a handsome thoroughbred four-year-old, "Black Deuce." These two I had reserved for my special use, and had therefore not sent away with the rest, but had gradually ridden them into some sort of form. Black Deuce, as his name implies, had a horrible temper. Few persons could get on him—in fact, owing to the difficulties of mounting him I had been able to buy him for the ridiculously small sum of eight pounds. He used to lay his ears back and kick violently, while biting viciously at the person holding his bridle. But once on his back, he went quietly enough, barring an occasional fling out with both hind legs when such a performance could least be expected. He had been tried in harness, but kicked every trap to atoms. I never had the slightest difficulty in mounting this animal—why, I do not know. He let me get on him quietly from the very first day, though no one else could do so. He stood about 15-3, had fine sloping shoulders, good quarters, a small lean head, and a nose you could put into a tumbler. He was perfectly black, without a single white mark, and his paces were, like those of most thoroughbreds, perfect. But he was a terrible daisy-cutter, and his forelegs were scarcely

to be trusted. Reinette was a mere pony, barely 14-2, also thoroughbred, gentle as a lamb, game as a pheasant, and able to jump like a cat. She had cost twenty. I entered both for the open steeplechase, and Black Deuce, in addition, for the hurdle race. For these races B—— had no horses entered, but he was to ride one of our mutual friend's, Baron X——'s, in each race. It was generally understood in M—— that my horses, being only, so to say, temporary denizens of a very inferior stable, were altogether out of it, and the high-priced race-horses of the neighbouring swells were of course freely backed in preference. There was not much betting, but what little money there was in the market went down on Baron X——'s Istvan for the hurdle race, and the colonel of the regiment's English horse Thormanby for the steeple. They were great at English names in Hungary, and every screw in the regiment was called after some Derby winner. There was a good deal of chaff at the hussars' mess the day before the race. My friend Count B—— was considered, as indeed he was, the crack jockey of the regiment. He could manage eleven stone in a hunting saddle, and had ridden many a steeplechase at Gödöllö, the Hungarian Newmarket. The regimental cup was considered a gift for him and his mare Caller-Ou, and every owner had been trying to get him to ride his horse in the other races. I was sitting opposite to him at dinner, and was a good deal bantered about my "eight pound screw." B—— had taken rather more wine than usual, and offered to bet me a sum which was enormous for an Austro-Hungarian officer, 1000 florins to 250 on each race, that his mount would beat mine. I accepted this bet and calmly booked it, when he suddenly exclaimed: "But perhaps I am done! Are you going to ride anyone else's horse?" "No," I replied; "if my own are not fit, I shall ride no one else's. You have to beat Reinette or Black Deuce—I don't know which I shall run, they are both so bad." A great deal of nonsense followed; B—— ordered more champagne on the strength of the 500 florins, which he said were as good as in his pocket, and I left them all going steadily at more gold-topped bottles. I could

not stand much, and therefore retired at ten o'clock, took a look at my two crocks, and turned in.

I was afoot early to look after them. As I entered his stall, Black Deuce lashed out viciously as usual, so that there was very nearly an end of all my racing performances on the spot. But he did not bite, for his nose was deep in the corn-bin, and his appetite told me that all was right. Reinette, of course, turned her intelligent head and smelt my pocket for the accustomed apple. By-and-by I had both out, and mounting Black Deuce myself, while my native groom (a wretched rider, but a plucky fellow) backed the mare, I gave them a gentle breather across the meadows behind my quarters. They pulled up strong and well, and I had no fear as to their condition. But I did not dare to leave them in the hands of the natives, and therefore missed the first military race, only appearing on the Grand Stand just as the Regimental Cup was run for. My friend B—— won it in a common canter, hands down, and came bowling along on Caller-Ou as if he were out at exercise.

But four miles across country had told on him more than on the horse; as he returned to weigh in, he eagerly quaffed the large goblet of sparkling wine one of his comrades offered him. Tossing it down in the exultation of victory, he lighted a cigar, and the congratulations of his fellow officers still further raised his spirits. His backers in and out of the regiment continued to press champagne on him, so that when the saddling bell rang for the open steeplechase he had had quite enough, if not too much. The previous night's festivities had also told their tale, and as he got on Thormanby's back I fancied I saw a distinct reel. Little Reinette greatly excited his amusement, as she was a mere dwarf in comparison to Thormanby, and the crowd joined in his chaff. I could have picked up any number of tens-to-one, but was satisfied with taking a few modest five pound notes. This race was four miles across country, 11st. 7lb. each. With a 10lb. saddle I just contrived not to carry overweight, and at the start held my little mare well in hand. Five went to the post, three racing away like mad. After lying

behind more than half the course, I could see that B—— was beaten—not his horse. I then galloped along, for just in front of the favourite was the water jump. Wind and pace were wanted to clear it. B—— raised his whip as he approached the brook, but he was evidently more fagged than his horse; there was a scramble, and then a splash. Thormanby had jumped short, and both were struggling in the water. A number of peasants rushed to the rescue, so, keeping well to the left to clear, I sent Reinette along at her best. She sprang the water like a cat just as B—— was mounting his wet and shivering steed. The others had previously met with accidents. I was over into the last field but one before Thormanby was well going again, and as I jumped the last hurdle crash he came against it, and tore right through furze and timber. This stopped him again, and I kept my lead, for I had nursed Reinette, and was not a bit blown myself, while B—— could clearly no longer ride. There was not much of a finish. Thormanby swerved all over the course, while the mare, full of running, went as straight as an arrow, and won by two lengths.

I shall never forget B——'s face as we returned to weigh in. He did not say a word to me, and only swore briefly when some other friend spoke to him. A sinister smile came over his face when the judge (the regimental paymaster) facetiously remarked: "Well, B——, you have at least saved Baron Z——'s stake for him." I must confess that I was as much surprised as he was, though of course better pleased. I never expected to win this race with tiny Reinette: I owed my luck to two circumstances—too much champagne, and a horse called Red Rover, who raced from the start, spoiled Thormanby's temper and tired out B——. There was now an hour's interval before the hurdle race. I did not entertain the slightest doubt that Black Deuce could beat anything for pace, if I could only keep him on his legs, for he was fast enough to win the Derby if it had only been a mile, and the course this time was a mile and a half only. There were no less than seven entered. Black Deuce lashed out so in the enclosure that I had to mount him outside. He bit

Tumbling on his head as I was pulling him up.

the groom and made himself so intensely disagreeable all round that I felt quite a nuisance. At the start I was given the outside berth of all, and no one came near me, so at any rate I could not complain of being interfered with. But the beauty of Black Deuce was that as soon as he was allowed to move, his temper changed as if by enchantment. His mouth was so light that you could ride him with a thread; he never rushed at fences, he would allow himself to be twisted about like a teetotum—in fact, he was perfection. But he hated standing, and detested a lot of horses near him more than anything. As I mistrusted his staying powers, but knew that he possessed both patience and speed, I laid well behind the ruck. I was last but one up to the second hurdle from the finish, then I let him go. He flew along like a rocket, rushing past the whole field, including Istvan, who, however, was soon set going again by B——. But when it came to a question of speed I had the heels of the favourite, and a most exciting race was won by a neck, Black Deuce falling on his nose as I pulled him up. This time B——'s rage was terrible. He did not wait to weigh in, but at once left the course with a couple of friends, swearing violently the while. I was soon to learn that his anger was not appeased by a few expletives.

CHAPTER II.

A BALL.

"B—— is in an awful rage," said Captain Doboy, a mutual friend, to me. "I am afraid there is some mischief brewing. Be careful."

"What can he do?" I asked. "I beat him fair and square; surely he cannot pretend that he has been badly used."

"No," answered my friend; "but he is in a bad temper, and will probably try to pick a quarrel with you. Look out."

"Oh, I won't give him a chance," I remarked, lightly. "There is the ball to-night, where, no doubt, we shall both enjoy ourselves, and he will forget all about his fancied injuries.

Besides, I am not in a hurry for the money. He can pay me those two thousand florins when he likes."

"Well, remember and be careful," repeated my friend Doboy, as we parted to change our dress; "don't give him a chance of quarrelling."

I promised to follow his advice, little thinking how difficult I should find it to keep my word. It was dark long before I reached home, thoroughly tired out; for winning two long races is no joke for an amateur, even when he is in fair condition. I did not go to mess, in order to get a chance of a nap, and to avoid meeting B—— till he had cooled down, but sent for a cutlet to the nearest inn, changed my clothes, and had a couple of hours' sleep. About nine o'clock my servant woke me to go to the race ball, which was to take place at the Assembly Rooms. All the beauty, rank, and fashion of M—— and the neighbourhood were to attend, and many who had small claims to any of these three distinctions. When I entered the room it was through a crowd of Hussars in their elegant uniform, who, as usual, assembled round the door to watch the ladies coming in. B——'s usually bright, open face was still clouded, and the frown darkened when he saw me.

To understand fully what follows, it must be premised that at all public balls in Austria and Hungary (and at many private ones also) no lady is expected to dance a whole dance with any one partner. The custom is for the gentleman to come and bow to any lady he chooses, asking for a "*tour*." Unless she is absolutely tired out, and wishes to dance no more, or unless she has an equally valid excuse—such, for instance, that she does not waltz—she is bound to accept him. She may wait a minute if out of breath, and she need only go round the room once, but this much she must do, under pain of being called to order by the master of the ceremonies if the rejected gentleman chooses to complain to him. As soon as one *tour* is over, she can, if she will, stop, and then she need not take another *tour* with the same partner during the same dance. If both like each

other, they can take more than one *tour* together, but when a girl is a great favourite there are always several watching for the couple to stop, and before her partner has even released her another is sure to have made his bow, and to have engaged her for the next turn. Thus a pretty girl, if a good dancer, is incessantly at it, and seldom gets more than one, or at most two turns with the man she prefers in each dance, unless, indeed, the two are betrothed, when it is of course etiquette to ask the gentleman's permission to dance with his future bride.

Now I had no idea that these rules were really enforced. I was always much annoyed that as soon as I had got used to the step of some nice girl, and had begun to get on with her, some other fellow swept her off without ceremony. On this evening, of course, I was made a good deal of on account of my unexpected success on the Turf, and had as many partners as I wanted, but not as much *as* I wanted of those I preferred. Perhaps my two wins made me bumptious, perhaps I was fired by liquor; but at any rate I stuck to one particular girl I had taken a fancy to, a Miss C——, with great pertinacity. She was, indeed, only the Postmaster's daughter, but she was good-looking, a capital dancer, and willing to flirt to any extent with me; and all these were qualities I warmly appreciated. I soon got very tired of seeing her swept off in the middle of some pretty speech I was making, and it appeared to me that B—— invariably selected such a moment to ask her to dance. So at last I proposed that we should dance the next waltz *à l'Anglaise*. She agreed willingly; "only," said she, "I fear I cannot do the step." "The step is the same," I explained (which it was not, for what English girl ever waltzed like a Hungarian?); "but the difference is that you keep the same partner throughout the dance." She consented, and when the waltz struck up we dashed off.

When we had had two or three turns round the room, and stopped for breath, B—— came up and asked for a *tour*. "I am engaged," she answered. "Who to?" he asked.

"To Mr. Smith," replied she. "But you have just danced with him!" "But," she explained, "we are dancing *à l'Anglaise*, and I am going to give him the whole dance." "Indeed you must not," urged B——, still fairly cool and polite; "for it is against the rules." Turning to me he said, "You are a stranger, and perhaps do not know them. A lady has no right to refuse any partner, unless she chooses to leave off dancing altogether." "I do not much care about your rules," I answered; "but I am quite willing to leave the decision to Miss C——. She can abide by them if she likes. With whom will you dance?" I asked, turning to the young lady. The audacious flirt probably thought that nothing would be more charming than to be the cause of a row; so she flew into my arm, which was ready, and we whirled away, careless of B——'s astonishment and of his toes. He did not approach us during the rest of this dance, but I noticed him conversing eagerly in the doorway with his brother-officers, and pointing us out to them. When it was over, the same mutual friend, Captain Doboy, who had spoken to me as we were leaving the racecourse, came up with a serious face. "You have committed a great blunder," he said. "Count B—— cannot swallow the affront you have put on him before all his brother-officers. You must not dance again to-night."

"Not dance again to-night? Ridiculous!" I exclaimed. "Indeed, I shall."

"Well, then," said he, "Miss C—— must not dance again. She must plead a headache, or fatigue, or something."

"That's still more absurd," I answered, turning to her; "is it not? Will you not again dance with me?"

"Certainly, if you wish, Mr. Smith," she replied, demurely looking down, though the little vixen well knew that she was getting me into a scrape.

"Then, if you persist," continued Doboy, "I must beg you at least to come out into the refreshment-room for a few minutes, in order that there may be no row before the ladies."

With this suggestion I of course at once complied, and, taking his arm, walked into the adjoining apartment, where, to my surprise, I found nearly all the officers of the regiment assembled, the grey-headed Colonel amongst them. "I hope," said he, as we entered, "that Mr. Smith will consent not to dance again." Captain Doboy answered for me, "I am afraid not, Colonel. Mr. Smith says he cannot obey our rules." "But," the veteran began, "though you are a stranger, you have been at several of our balls, and you know the customs of the country. Count B—— here says your partner declined to dance with him, and after he had asked for a *tour*, you deliberately waltzed away with her. Is this correct?" I nodded assent. "Well," said he, "Count B—— could fairly have gone to the master of the ceremonies, and that person would have prevented both you and your partner from dancing again. But he was unwilling to appeal to a dancing-master to impose a penalty on a gentleman, and has preferred laying the matter before his brother-officers, who witnessed the affront. Surely," he said, "you will see that it is impossible you should dance any more, unless indeed you apologise to Count B—— before the young lady. You would accept this, B——, would you not?"

B—— replied, "Certainly, but of course I should expect the next *tour* with her, and a *tour* in every dance as long as she continues in the room."

"Well," continued the Colonel, "you see how gentlemanly B—— is! Now, why not give way? Surely you will."

"I cannot," I replied. "I am sorry B—— feels affronted, but the lady deliberately preferred dancing with me, and refused him, and I will not lend a hand to forcing a partner on her. I will not promise to cease dancing, still less will I allow her to be interfered with. You will surely not use violence."

"No," said the Colonel, "but I shall then leave you to settle the quarrel elsewhere. Reflect. Is this your last word?"

"Yes," said I; "I cannot give way."

"Very well, then, good evening, sir." And he turned away on his heel.

At once Doboy and my other acquaintances surrounded me. "Come and have a bottle of wine," they said; "you need not promise anything, but stop in the supper-room. That will satisfy B——."

I firmly declined their invitations, and their pressing persuasions were useless. "As there is not going to be a row in the ball-room," I said, "which is the thing I feared, I cannot give up my partner. I give you my word that I shall not go away, but am ready to answer for my determination. *Au revoir!*" I returned to the dancing-room, and was rewarded for my obstinacy by Miss C——'s sweetest smiles. We danced together incessantly and unmolested till what is called the *Ruststunde* or supper hour, which is kept very sacred in Germany and Hungary, the band also retiring for some time to obtain refreshment. I escorted my partner into the supper-room, and was allowed to eat and drink in comfort for a short time. Soon, however, Doboy came up and whispered to me to take the lady back, as he had an important communication to make. In a few minutes I was at his disposal. "I am sorry to say I have a message for you from Count B——," he said; "will you be good enough to name a friend?" I looked round, and seeing Baron K—— standing near, one with whom I was not intimate, but knew sufficiently well to ask this favour of. "Will you act for me?" I inquired. "Mr. Jones, the English engineer, will be my other second.

"If you are determined to fight, I will do my best for you," replied K——, "but let us talk first." With these words he drew me apart and endeavoured to persuade me to apologise publicly to Count B——, assuring me that such a course would be no humiliation. As I obstinately declined, he at last saw that a duel was inevitable, and K——, having dragged off the unwilling Jones from an incipient flirtation, consulted with Doboy and the other second. In a few minutes these gentlemen gave Count B—— and myself instructions to retire to our

respective quarters as quietly and unostentatiously as possible, and by the custom of the country we were bound to obey, as we were in their hands. We therefore left the festive scene before dancing had been resumed.

CHAPTER III.

A DUEL.

I HAD hardly got rid of my dress clothes, and ensconced myself in my dressing gown, when Baron K—— and my other second appeared. The latter, though excessively good-natured, and glad to assist a fellow-countryman by every means in his power, knew about as much of the laws regulating duels in Hungary as I do of the constitution of the moon, and therefore simply said *ja!* to everything the Baron approved of; and emphatically shook his head when K—— said "No." The report of my friends was not encouraging. B——, they said, was determined to fight, and I was, according to the universal opinion, the offending party; B—— had, therefore, the choice of weapons, and had selected the Hungarian sabre. Baron K—— had been sharp enough to point out at once that though this rule might justly apply to two Hungarians fighting, it could not fairly be enforced on a foreigner who was unfamiliar with the national weapon. He had, therefore, objected, and the matter was being discussed by the seconds on the other side, who were not inclined to give way. Of course I did not feel at all disposed to become a mere block for Count B—— to hack at.

The Hungarian sabre is wielded in a very peculiar fashion, something like an Indian club, and the object of each party is to carve slices out of the antagonist's flesh. It is not, perhaps, so frequently fatal as the pistol or the French small-sword, but it is much more brutal. I did not in the least know how to use it, while with the *fleuret* I was at home, and should have had a distinct advantage. It was bad enough to have to fight at all for the sake of a silly girl whom I

did not really care two straws about, and a still sillier rule, which I had been a fool to infringe; but I was determined not to become simply a victim for my enemy to carve at his ease. I therefore distinctly refused the sabre. Message followed message, and consultation consultation, and it was three o'clock in the morning before pistols were finally agreed on. Being short-sighted, I was not a good shot, but then neither was B——, and the contest was therefore approximately equal. My adversary was extremely unwilling to fight with pistols; for, after all, a bullet is more likely to kill a fellow than a broad carving-knife swung over the shoulder, and "first blood" with the latter means very little, while with the former it often signifies death. But Doboy and others persuaded B—— that having once called me out, and as it was clearly impossible to force me to fight with a beastly thing I had never wielded in my life, the pistol was the only weapon that could be accepted by both sides. So finally the affair was arranged for eight o'clock the same morning (the reader must not forget that it was November), in a glade in a wood about two miles from the town, distance twenty-five paces, both to fire together, and to continue firing together at the seconds' signals till one or the other was wounded.

Baron K—— left to arrange for pistols, a doctor, and all other requirements, promising to come and fetch me at seven sharp. At my request he left my English second with me, but strongly recommended a few hours' rest. But I was too excited to sleep, and, if I must confess it, too frightened. It is all very well talking big about duelling and duels, but to stand up opposite a man with a pistol in his hand is a most unpleasant feeling. This was my first "affair of honour," and I did not like it at all. I felt that I would much rather that B—— had danced every blessed dance with the Postmaster's daughter. I wished a thousand times that I had not gone to the ball. And my friend did not make me much more comfortable by asking what the good folks at home would say if they heard that I had been killed by a semi-savage Hungarian for flirting with a semi-civilised Magyar girl. And then he inquired whether I had not

better make my "last will and testament," a performance which K—— had already hinted at. This I positively declined. I felt more and more "funky" every moment, and was sure that if I tried to write my dying wishes, I should be quite unmanned. "No," said I; "let us play picquet till morning." This young Jones would not consent to: he finally persuaded me to lie down, and, strange as it may seem, the physical fatigue of two races and a number of dances so far prevailed that I fell into an uneasy slumber.

But I was awake by dawn, to find Jones busy getting me a cup of tea, with the help of my faithful Hungarian servant, who clearly felt that something was "up," though he did not quite know what. Somehow, chilly and nasty as the morning was, I felt more reassured. I tumbled into a cold tub, and was scrubbing myself dry, when K—— came in, and laughingly exclaimed, "Well, you English are funny people! You wash yourselves all over when you are going to be shot dead an hour afterwards!" a remark of which I failed to perceive the wit, while its extreme unpleasantness brought back another fit of depression. I felt anything but jolly when I was helped into the carriage, and the appearance of the doctor, with an elaborate case of instruments and a huge parcel of lint, did not raise my courage. We arrived at the appointed spot within a minute of our adversaries. The carriages stopped at a corner of the high-road between M—— and V——, which passed through an extensive forest. Descending, K——, with a pistol-case under his arm, led the way, tramping through the fallen leaves of the beech wood, where my nervousness made me stumble over the roots more than once. Then we passed through a very narrow but thick belt of stunted firs, which effectually shielded from view an open glade, where withered grass and faded wild-flowers showed that winter was approaching. At one end of this glade stood, all solitary, a giant oak, whose gnarled branches were still laden with dead leaves. Under this tree the doctor proceeded to unpack his horrid paraphernalia, and here the four seconds—or rather the three, for the Englishman only looked

on—opened the pistol cases and compared the weapons they had brought.

Having chosen a pair, they stepped out the ground. I was standing on one side, about ten paces, as I thought, from the tree, B—— the same distance on the other. One of the seconds remarked, pleasantly, "Our men are well placed as they are; let them fire from their present position." But K——, I was thankful to see, insisted on accurate measurement. What was my horror when they brought us considerably *nearer* to each other than we had been before, and declared that the few feet which separated us were twenty-five paces! I felt sure that B——, who looked as cool as a cucumber, would shoot me dead at the first shot, while, as to myself, I felt convinced that I could have shot *him* dead if I had not been trembling all over. I suppose, however, that my face did not betray the agony I felt, for my Hungarian second whispered, "Glad to see you all right again; keep quiet, and don't be in a hurry." The pistols were then loaded with a good deal of show of fairness; and as the bullets were rammed in I almost thought one was being rammed into my chest. Then both weapons were covered with a pocket-handkerchief; and a coin having been tossed up, K—— called, and lost. B—— had therefore the first choice of weapons; his second put his hand under the handkerchief and drew a pistol out; the other was brought to me. We were placed with our backs to each other and warned that at the word "Three!" we were to face round and fire. K—— took up a position opposite the tree a few yards off, and asked whether we were ready. "*Igen!*" answered B——, in a deep, sonorous, and firm voice. "*Igen!*" answered I, tremblingly, and wishing that I wasn't ready. Then followed what appeared a terrible pause. At last *one!*—another pause—*two!*—another——

"Stop, gentlemen, stop! In the name of the law I arrest you!" These words fell suddenly on our ears. I turned round hastily and beheld two gendarmes rushing up to B——, while a short, red-faced man, in ordinary dress, came puffing up behind them. In him I recognised our worthy Postmaster, the father

of the fair cause of all this mischief. I was still staring from one to another, wondering what the interruption could mean, and thanking Heaven for it, when B—— called out, "This is a trick of that infernal English black-leg! No one but he would have set the police on us!" Before I could answer, K—— jumped forward. "How dare you say such a thing, B——? You must be insane! I will answer for Mr. Smith; one of us two has been with him ever since the ball. In insulting him, remember that you insult me also!" "I don't care," continued B——; "I am sure that that sneak ——" "Oh, gentlemen! *ach*, gentlemen, please excuse, forgive my liberty!" called out the little Postmaster, who had by this time recovered his breath; "you are quite wrong, Mr. Smeet he never tell me anything. Mr. Smeet is as great cavalier as the Count—both are cavaliers." (It must be remarked that "cavalier" in Hungary is used in the sense of "nobleman" or "perfect gentleman.") "My daughter, the naughty cat, she make the mischief; but, God be thanked, she tell everything." "Your daughter?" we both exclaimed, dropping our pistols in the wet grass, on which B——'s second instantly proceeded to pick them up, draw the charges, and wipe them with scrupulous care. "Yes," continued the little man; "my daughter!"

From the explanation he then gave us, broken as it was by many questions from each and all of us, and his replies, it appeared that the little scene in the refreshment room, related in the last chapter, had not been entirely without witnesses. Someone had told Miss C—— that Count B—— and the Englishman had quarrelled, and the absence of both from the ball-room confirmed the story. On her homeward way the little flirt could not keep her triumph to herself, and confided to her eldest sister, under the promise of secrecy, her opinion that the "two cavaliers" were going to fight a duel for her sake. But the sister was wise, and as soon as she got a chance actually woke her sleeping father to tell him of the event.

The good-hearted old man, who really liked both of us, was terribly frightened, and instantly rose in the dull November

night, and rushed off to awake the *Polizei Commissär*. The latter gentleman was naturally annoyed at being disturbed, but the official position of the Postmaster obtained for him a hearing, if not exactly a patient one. The *Commissär* was inclined to pooh-pooh the matter, but consented to give the Postmaster an escort of two gendarmes and an order to arrest us if necessary. The old gentleman then got his carriage ready—and his office enabled him to do so very quickly—and drove to my quarters, which he found empty, his suspicions being thus confirmed. When he was informed at the barracks that Count B—— and several other officers had gone out early he became quite certain of his case, and a very few inquiries of a couple of early market people indicated the direction the carriages had taken, for two smart traps driving out of M—— at half-past seven on a November morning were sure to attract the attention of the few people about. On the high road he had come upon our carriages, and then, of course, discovery was inevitable.

We drove back into M—— rather ignominiously, each in his own carriage accompanied by one second and a gendarme, the other seconds and the doctor going with the Postmaster. We were at once taken to the *Polizei-Commissariat*, when, the *Commissär* not having yet breakfasted, we were dismissed until eleven o'clock, bail having been tendered for both of us by the Postmaster himself. He took each of us by the arm as we left the building. "Now, my fine *Jungens*," said he, "don't be foolish. My daughter, she, no doubt, very pretty girl; but very silly, very coquette, and only a child. *You* don't want to marry her, Count B——; *your* people would call it a *mésalliance*, and quite right, too. *You* don't want to marry her, Mr. Smeet; for you is waiting in England some fair maid with blue eyes, very proper and very good housewife. It is all the fault of that child. Now, come to breakfast with me at the Golden Goose and talk it over, then make friends. Mr. Smeet, he is a stranger. You won't let English people say that Hungarians are savages and shoot strangers? Count B——, he is a fine

cavalier. You, Mr. Smeet, do not want to kill so fine a cavalier? Come, now, it is time for an *Eierspeise* and a *gulyas*."

Why make a short story long? We had breakfast with the Postmaster, who, on the road, asked our seconds as well. He mixed us up at the table, and mixed our liquors. We were stiff at first, but his good nature and funny ways carried the day. Before we had reached dessert we were sworn friends again. When a gendarme walked in and said that the *Commissär* was waiting we were all as jolly as if there had been no quarrel. We attended before the worthy official, were bound over to keep the peace, and were discharged without a stain on our characters.

But B—— never paid me those 2,000 florins. If any of my readers can get them for me, he may keep half.

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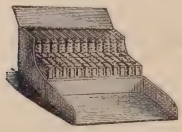

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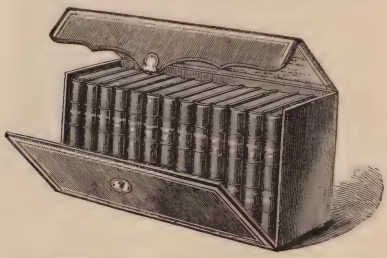

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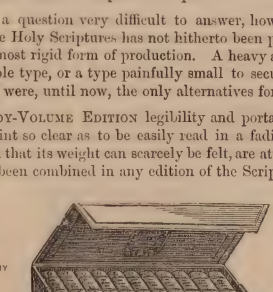

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